Free Play: Games, Labor, and the Negotiation of Value on the Internet

By

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Introduction: Free Games Online

Club Penguin died on March 30th, 2017. Its servers were shut down at 12:01 AM Pacific time. Hundreds of users, all masquerading as penguins, stood in the MMO's public squares spamming heart emojis and goodbye messages to each other, including "faithful till the end" and "waddle on my friends." Any players present for the game's final minutes were then greeted by a simple message saying, "The connection has been lost. Thank you for playing Club Penguin. Waddle on!" 12 years after *Club Penguin*'s initial release in 2005, having dwindled to only 6 million active accounts, the website had finally come to its conclusion. In some ways, *Club Penguin* represented the last vestige of free children's browser-based entertainment. As mobile gaming grew in popularity with gamers both old and young, games like *Club Penguin*, *Neopets*, *Webkins, Gaia Online*, and others began to decline in usership as well as in quality. Upon the death of *Club Penguin*, Twitter was abuzz with fondness for the site, and *Buzzfeed* ran the story "Disney's Club Penguin Shut Down And People Are Devastated," a story which largely consisted of reposted tweets like "CLUB PENGUIN TELLING ME TO WADDLE ON IS THE SADDEST THING IVE HEARD IN A LONG WHILE" and "Me crying once Club Penguin officially shut down and these are actual tears" captioning a misty-eyed picture of the adult Twitter user who posted it.[1] It was clear that the previous users of the site still had an emotional attachment to it, even as its presence online had significantly waned. Playing this game generated a specific affective value which they carried into adulthood.

The impetus for this dissertation began when I was considering the games that I played online in my youth. The early 2000s specifically were a time when hundreds of thousands of

[1] BuzzFeed Community Team, "Disney's Club Penguin Shut Down And People Are Devastated," *BuzzFeed Community*, March 30, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/georgerizz/club-penguin-finally-closed-last-night-and-people-2gdrn.

games were released online for free on platforms like Neopets, Newgrounds, Kongregate, and other platforms designed to facilitate the free play of games. These games were a success across demographics, and they were also influential on the current landscape of the gaming industry in both large and small ways. At its peak, *Club Penguin* was incredibly popular. By 2007, just two years after it began, it had reached over 12 million active users and was bought by Disney for $350 million dollars.[2] By 2013 it had ballooned to over 200 million penguins and was buoyed by integrations with Disney content like *Star Wars*.[3] So, it was clear that this free game had generated exceptional value both for the fans who played it and the company that had a vested economic interest in its success. Other free games had similar trajectories. In 2005 Neopets had already hit 25 million active users.[4] The site would later be acquired by Viacom. Free games were also often very critically well-respected. Titles like Newgrounds founder Tom Fulp's *Alien Hominid* were being honored at industry events like the Independent Games Festival at the Game Developers Conference. Free online games were big business and represented big opportunities for their developers.

Video games have been distributed for free for as long as the medium has existed. In fact, video games were free long before they cost money. Though there is some debate as to what qualifies as the first video game, all of the early contenders including 1948's *Cathode-Ray Tube Amusement Device,* 1951's *Nim* and 1952's *OXO* were free diversions intended to exhibit the possibilities of computers. They became the draw in order for laboratories or corporations to

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[2] Andrew Walmsley, "Kids' Virtual Worlds Are Maturing Nicely.," *Marketing*, October 24, 2007: 13.

[3] Marc Graser, "'Star Wars' Takes Over Disney's Club Penguin," *Variety* (blog), July 11, 2013, https://variety.com/2013/digital/news/star-wars-takes-over-disneys-club-penguin-1200561084/.

[4] Nick Wingfield, "Web's Addictive Neopets Are Ready for Big Career Leap," *Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2005.

exemplify their technological capabilities. We might understand the game to function as the free lunch for the platform. Indeed, as I will argue in this dissertation, games and the platforms on which they are hosted go hand in hand. Like radio and television before them, free games can serve as draws for advertisers, inspiration for donations, or to build a following. Still, the difference in audience necessitates a difference in the style of the commodity, in the same way that television content differs from film content in no small part due to business models. Understanding the motivation of free game platforms as well as developers is crucial. To achieve this goal, this dissertation is an attempt to merge the historical contextualization of free game platforms with a political economic analysis of their development alongside a discursive and critical analysis of the games themselves, the circulation of social value surrounding them, and their implication in the affective lives of users and developers. In other words, it will tell the story of the history of free games in service of explaining the multiple values generated by their requisite labor. To be clear, the inclusion of users is not focused on their capacity as players per se, but rather as part of the organizational structure that supports free games. When a social network and game like Neopets requires free labor to support it, that labor should also be considered as a kind of developmental labor with its own value system. In some cases, such as Newgrounds, the labor of the users is game development labor, and Newgrounds the company is focused on providing a platform for those games. It is in the comparison and contrast between user labor and developer labor that I see some of the most potential for explaining the role of labor in free gaming economies on the web.

Yet despite their popularity and success, very little scholarship has been devoted to the study of browser-based games. These games were freely distributed on the internet, often with the creators receiving no financial incentives for their work. It was this fact that has become the

ground for the central research question of this dissertation: Why do people make and release games for free online? Or, in other words, what kind of value is extracted from the labor it takes to create and maintain a game, from both users and developers? The answer, of course, is historically contextual based on the ecosystems surrounding games at the time. But a few patterns emerge: online communities from Bulletin Board Systems to forums to subreddits have consistently relied on both making and playing games as foundations for individual and communal identity formation. The labor of game development, as well as that of the maintenance of these communities and the playing of the games themselves all directly generate value, both economic and non-economic. Moreover, the labor of free game development often becomes imbricated in the larger systems of capital, even if it that was never its intention. The goal of this dissertation is to explore the ways in which that value is manifested, understood, and utilized.

Oftentimes, when we talk about value in the video games industry, we are talking about economic value. The industry is often contextualized and valued by the amount of money it contributes to the global economy. Even in academic circles, this number has become a justification for studying games, as if the amount of money they make demonstrates their scholarly relevance. Anecdotally, I have noticed video game scholars touting the billions of dollars that the video game industry generates every year as proof of its utility to academia. From $70 console mainstays to $15 indie darlings, paid games proliferate the discourses of game studies. Although these games are certainly worth discussing, I am interested in games that fall between the cracks. In categorizing video games primarily as something that is bought and sold, we can lack nuance in our political economic portrait of the industry.

In *Handmade Pixels*, Jesper Juul describes what he calls “normal games,” which he says were the only types of games sold from 1980–2005. Though he is using these games as a foil for

the independent games that are the subject of his book, we might understand this to be a baseline for the “common sense” definition of the video game commodity during the time. Juul writes that video games at the time followed four rules:

- were involved activities on which players had to spend hours at a time;
- were sold in boxes;
- targeted males aged 10–35; and
- games (and especially hardware) were promoted on the basis of technically better graphics. Graphics did not have to be beautiful or pleasing but had to demonstrate the capabilities of the game console and the technical skills of the developer.[5]

If these are “normal games,” as Juul suggests, then what can we make of games that broke some or all of these rules? This dissertation chronicles games from the late 80s on that were short and digital-first, targeted a variety of audiences, and had little focus on the graphical capabilities of their platforms. Instead of normal games, I want to investigate the parallel industry of free games that were distributed digitally.

The ultimate argument of this dissertation is that studying free games can provide key insights into building a larger picture of value in the context of the video game industry. Free distribution provides its own unique benefits for making games, often as a result of lower barriers to entry and costs for development, distribution, and play. But this same distribution strategy can also create challenges for developers players alike. Moving forward, every chapter in this dissertation operates on an epistemology of ambivalence, where I attempt to explain both how the free distribution of games on the internet provided for unique opportunities to create and share unique game experiences and generate creative, communal, and affective value alongside economic value while at the same time carrying challenges in the form of financial instability,

[5] Jesper Juul, *Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 10.

difficult online cultures, platform dependence, and more. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, opening up the study of the video game industry to free online distribution can expand our understanding of what video games are and what video games can do.

Free Games, Free Labor

This dissertation is about a singular model of development and distribution: free video games on the internet. I find this model to exist across multiple different spaces and in multiple different time periods: BBS game code in the 80s and 90s, flash games in the 2000s, and embedded games and apps in the 2010s. But because many video games are sold as paid commodities, much of the scholarship on video game distribution focuses on the distribution of paid games. In particular, I find that scholarship on distribution tends to be particularly console-focused or focused on Steam. This work is important but tends to ignore free game downloads as a salient form of digital distribution.[6] Free distribution is more than just an economic decision. It's a method that opens up possibilities for experimentation in terms of form, content, and labor. Game developers who are marginalized from mainstream video game production often utilize this distribution model, whether because they are shut out of paid publishing, because of its accessibility, or because of its utility in being able to quickly release games that may not fit within a traditional publishing model. Ultimately, the study of free distribution is often the study of games on the margin, and therefore games that speak to marginalized labor and systems of value.

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[6] See: Jeffry Babb, Neil Terry, and Kareem Dana, "The Impact Of Platform On Global Video Game Sales," *International Business & Economics Research Journal (IBER)* 12, no. 10 (September 30, 2013): 1273, https://doi.org/10.19030/iber.v12i10.8136; Stefan Werning, "Disrupting Video Game Distribution: A Diachronic Affordance Analysis of Steam's Platformization Strategy," *Nordic Journal of Media Studies* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 2019): 103–24, https://doi.org/10.2478/njms-2019-0007; Michael Mattioli, "History of Video Game Distribution," *IEEE Consumer Electronics Magazine* 10, no. 2 (March 1, 2021): 59–63, https://doi.org/10.1109/MCE.2020.3032778.

The most obvious aspect of freeness in free games is their price. In telling the history of free games, I would draw a distinction between the freely distributed games discussed in this dissertation and the more recent model known as free-to-play. Nominally, free-to-play games fall under the umbrella of free games, and this dissertation is about free games. There is some overlap between the distribution models that I will be investigating. But I will largely elide discussion of games that rely on microtransactions or subscriptions—so called "live games"— in this dissertation. Instead, I will focus on games that utilize either nothing or advertising revenue to supplement their freeness. This is not a particularly easy distinction to make; many games use both microtransactions and advertising as a form of support. But I think it is necessary to separate this earlier generation of free games from the later model. There are a few reasons for this. Firstly, there has already been significant academic attention paid to the free-to-play model. Several book-length projects already exist that discuss the microtransaction economy, including Shira Chess's *Ready Player Two* and Christopher A. Paul's *Free-to-Play*.[7] David Nieborg has also discussed the complicated aspects of the free-to-play game from a political economic standpoint, including the ways in which free-to-play games are implicated in the success of Facebook as a gaming platform and their mutually beneficial relationship with developers such as Zynga.[8] Free internet games also necessitate specific methods and methodologies that differ from free-to-play games. While the generation of value in free-to-play games is obvious, value in earlier free games is often abstracted into cultural or audience labor which is removed from the

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[7] Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Christopher A. Paul, *Free-to-Play: Mobile Video Games*, *Bias, and Norms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020).

[8] David B. Nieborg, "Crushing Candy: The Free-to-Play Game in Its Connective Commodity Form," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (September 22, 2015): 205630511562193, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115621932.

direct economic relationship of buying and selling commodities. Finally, free games in the 90s and 00s are an underexplored connecting thread between early video games and the boom of free-to-play economies. It is my hope to show that, while unique in their own right, free internet games have also had an immense impact on the way that we understand all varieties of game today. For these reasons, this dissertation will focus on free games which fall outside of the free-to-play system. This is not an ontological argument meant to separate free-to-play games from their earlier predecessors, but rather a practical approach to limit the scope of the dissertation.

So, this dissertation will explore games that don't cost money to play. But there are other ways that the "free" in "free games" functions as a descriptor other than price. An important aspect of our understanding of free games is to explore how freeness functions outside of its economic definition. Freedom and online games intersect in various ways, including creative freedom and autonomy, freedom of speech, and freedom from industrial and hegemonic structures and norms that bind labor in the digital media industries.

Online games are often a space where developers have expressed that their work in free games gives them more control in the creative choices surrounding game development. As we will investigate in chapters 2 and 4, free games are often free in the sense that the developers feel free to make meaningful and personal creative choices without the pressure to sell a game. In their study of creative labor, David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker investigate the difference between labor perceived as "good work" and labor perceived as "bad work ." They write, "we have outlined good work as involving autonomy, interest and involvement, sociality, self-esteem, self-realisation, work–life balance and security. Conversely, this is a conception of bad work as involving control by or dependence on others; boredom; isolation; low self-esteem or shame;

frustrated self-realisation, overwork and risk."[9] I would like to specifically focus on the autonomy portion of their definition to theorize free games. Good work as autonomous work, as work which is unencumbered by outside pressure or concerns, is also theorized to be dealienated work. Contrasting Robert Blauner's understanding of alienation as powerlessness and meaninglessness, Hesmondhalgh and Baker posit that autonomy is a crucial component of good work, especially work in the creative industries.[10] Free games can be defined in part by this autonomy, if we understand autonomy in the case of game development to be the freedom to control the creative elements of the game. I would also add free speech as an additional component of autonomy. Almost all of the games in this dissertation were released before the United States Supreme Court ruled that video games should be granted free speech protection in *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* in 2011. Nevertheless, chapters 1, 2, and 4 demonstrate how the internet could be used as a form of distribution in the goal of disseminating video game free speech long before that landmark decision.

Outside of the creative work itself, I would also argue that part of the freeness of free games is the freedom from the structures and norms of traditional video game development systems. Arguably every chapter in this dissertation includes this kind of freedom as part of its discussion of free games. In the same way that Jason Wilson has argued that indie game designers share a method of production that in some way falls outside the game industry's concentrated capital flows, I would argue that this often applies to free games.[11] In addition to the

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[9] David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*, Culture, Economy and the Social (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011), 36.

[10] Ibid., 32.

[11] Jason Wilson, "Indie Rocks! Mapping Independent Video Game Design," *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture & Policy*, no. 115 (May 2005): 109–22, 110.

obvious way that free distribution runs counter to some industry capital flows, there are other cultural aspects to the industry that free games counter. One is the intensified system of excessive deadline labor over the course of a development cycle, also known as "crunch." Peticca-Harris et al. argue that "extreme work remains a systemic problem in the game industry because of the structure and neo-normative control systems of competitive project-based regimes."[12] Such control systems include general workplace environments that normalize crunch, stress passion and the workplace as a family; perceived job insecurity in creative industries; "cool workplaces" that serve Gatorade, pizza, and donuts; and other forms of indirect control in addition to the more direct control of management demanding longer hours.[13] Another structure of traditional game development is the sedimentation of industry lore that creates narratives around what kinds of games do and don't sell. One aspect of AAA development concerning the representation of around gender, sexuality, and race in particular that "video game developers [at large companies in the US and Japan] face is an internalized pressure to create texts that are quickly understandable and sellable."[14] While free game developers can often replicate these structural issues, as I will argue is the case with Newgrounds in chapter 2, they are not necessarily beholden to them and have more latitude to challenge those norms, as I will argue in chapter 4. In any case, free games are often free in relation to their separation from the established norms of video game development cultures.

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[12] Amanda Peticca-Harris, Johanna Weststar, and Steve McKenna, "The Perils of Project-Based Work: Attempting Resistance to Extreme Work Practices in Video Game Development," *Organization* 22, no. 4 (July 2015): 582, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508415572509.

[13] Ibid., 573-575, 580.

[14] Sam Srauy, "Professional Norms and Race in the North American Video Game Industry," *Games and Culture* 14, no. 5 (July 2019): 479, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017708936,

Another important aspect of free games is free labor. To be sure, not all labor associated with free games as a model of distribution is free labor. As with network and cable television, sometimes releasing "free" content means investing a lot of capital into both workers and products. This is the case for chapters 3 and 5, where Neopets employees and *Flappy Bird* creator Dong Nguyen respectively are compensated for the games that they release for free. But free labor is a common kind of labor in making free games. In fact, the freeness of the labor is often its defining characteristic and what makes a game free. Whether it's volunteer labor in the case of making a game for charity in chapter 1, audience labor in the upkeep of a social platform in chapters 2 and 3, or speculative labor in the form of putting out an app or a browser game without guarantee of compensation in chapter 5, the freeness of the commodity often dictates the freeness of the labor. Italian Marxist theorist Tiziana Terranova argued in the early 2000s that free labor was the driver of the digital economy. For Terranova, free labor is the uncompensated work that goes into developing and maintaining communities on the web. She wrote:

> Free labor on the Net includes the activity of building web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists and building virtual spaces. Far from being an 'unreal', empty space, the Internet is animated by cultural and technical labor through and through, a continuous production of value which is completely immanent in the flows of the network society at large.[15]

The free labor behind moderating and maintaining the web can be found at a variety of levels: building large BBSs, freely releasing games online, or maintaining guilds in virtual worlds. Ultimately, Terranova argues that free labor online both replicates the conditions of the society-factory, where leisure time is exploited as labor. At the same time, and relevant to our

[15] Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor," in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Anna Watkins Fisher, and Thomas W. Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2016), 407–408.

understanding of freeness functioning outside of its economic sense, she argues that free labor is also freely given, enjoyed, and provides value to those doing the labor. The relationship between these two halves of free labor animates the following chapters, in particular chapters 1, 2, and 3.

As Fast et al. are quick to point out, however, the free labor model in media economies predates the internet significantly. Frustrated with Terranova's ahistorical approach to free labor as always already digital labor, they attempt a historicized framework for understanding the role of free labor in the media industries before and after the networked web. They describe seven metaphors for unpaid labor in the media industries: "The Slave, The Carer, The Hobbyist, The Volunteer, The Apprentice, The Prospector, and The Patsy."[16] The Slave is coerced into performing labor for free. The Carer provides emotional and care labor that is considered to be part of the private sphere. The Volunteer performs free labor for an altruistic goal, while The Hobbyist performs labor as a goal in and of itself, presumably for some kind of affective gain. The Prospector and The Apprentice both labor in anticipation of a future financial reward, but while The Prospector surveys the land and takes risky ventures in anticipation of payoff, The Apprentice ties I to a specific organization or individual with the understanding that their training will result in future opportunities. Finally, The Patsy does not realize that their actions are labor or are producing value, such as a social media user generating engagement which a company can then harvest for information and sell to advertisers.

While I appreciate the authors' attempt to create pre-digital analogues to free labor that apply historically, there are some issues with their approach. First, their concern that Terranova's

[16] Karin Fast, Henrik Örnebring, and Michael Karlsson, "Metaphors of Free Labor: A Typology of Unpaid Work in the Media Sector," *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 7 (October 2016): 963–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716635861: 966.

approach precludes free labor that is not given voluntarily entirely misses the point of free labor as a concept; the fact that it is willingly given is what allows labor scholars to understand the motivations and values being ascribed to the labor. This is one reason why The Slave is a problematic metaphor for a type of unpaid media labor, though unpaid and underpaid labor around media products, especially in manufacturing, is certainly an issue. By complicating the question of whether labor is indeed voluntary it clouds the question of what the internal motivations and values of the laborer are. But Terranova's interest in free labor is precisely in the fact that it is given freely in spite of a lack of monetary reward. Her theory suggests that there is intrinsic but demonstrable non-economic value produced by the free labor of internet custodians for themselves. As she states, free labor is "Simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited."[17] This differentiates unpaid labor from free labor. Therefore, we ought only understand "free labor" as that which is both freely given and uncompensated in order to sit with the ambivalence of value that results from it as well as understanding the motivations of laborers. Nevertheless, Fast et al.'s framework provides a good foundation for understanding the various forms free labor takes in the media industries. Together, the definition of freeness in this dissertation coalesces around price, expression, creativity, and labor.

Ultimately, this dissertation is in conversation with scholars of video game labor to provide a specific insight into the places where theories of labor and game development might intersect. Even as early as the Atari days, game companies began to lean too heavily on game labor in the age of convergence. In his study of Atari in the wake of its acquisition by Warner Communications in the 1970s, James Fleury describes seven issues faced by the developers, including "truncated production schedules; extended work hours; recycled creativity; mandated

[17] Terranova, "Free Labor," 409.

assignments from above rather than pitched projects from below; a lack of royalties or credits; restricted access to resources; and delegitimizing rhetoric."[18] These problems in game development continue to this day, and while they are slowly being addressed through actions like unionization, progress is slow. In this sense, the video game industry has always been one of exploitation.

Yet, the literature often bears the similar ambivalent sentiment that this dissertation holds. Ergin Bulut describes both the glamor and the precarity that the video game industry exemplifies. He argues that the immaterial labor of game testing is a hope labor for the more glamorous positions such as design and programming, even as these positions often also drift toward precarity in the ever-changing landscape of the gaming industry.[19] Bo Ruberg describes another tension specific to queer indie game developers. They argue that, although games by queer developers are often celebrated in the industry and seen as an inspirational form of development that companies can learn from, this often doesn't translate into material gains for the developers themselves, especially because the games are free and therefore seen as easy to make.[20] In chapter four of this dissertation I concur with Ruberg in this sentiment on queer developers, noting that they often use free distribution in creative and novel ways but that this distribution does not always equate to financial success, and in fact often creates supplementary cultural value for other jobs such as teaching and writing. Perhaps the ultimate ambivalent view of the

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[18] James Fleury, "From *Superman* to *Swordquest* : Atari and Early Video Game Labor Exploitation," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 00 (2023): 3, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12551.

[19] Ergin Bulut, "Glamor Above, Precarity Below: Immaterial Labor in the Video Game Industry," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 32, no. 3 (May 27, 2015): 193–207, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1047880.

[20] Bo Ruberg, "The Precarious Labor of Queer Indie Game-Making: Who Benefits from Making Video Games 'Better'?," *Television & New Media* 20, no. 8 (December 2019): 778–88, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419851090.

labor of gamemaking comes from Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, who argue in *Games of Empire* that the medium of video games occupy a specific point of tension in out current global capitalist economy. Specifically, they argue that "*video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire*—planetary, militarized hypercapitalism— *and* of some of the forces presently challenging it."[21] The authors note that there is an ambivalent tension between the militarized imagery and capitalist economies both present in and developed alongside games, and the fact that games are "exemplary of the multitude, in that game culture includes subversive and alternative experiments searching for a way out," or, in other words, people are using games to create solutions for and an escape from the Empire that other games reify.[22] This is all to say that video games carry a deep duality within them in regard to labor, capital, and resistance to hegemonic norms of value.

Games also create an opportunity to rethink labor. In his article "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," Julian Kücklich coined the term "playbour" to describe the tenuous relationship between work and play in game development, in this case creating mods. As Kücklich argues, modding is just as close to open-source software development as it is to the productive leisure activities to which it is often likened.[23] This understanding of playbor maps onto much of the work being discussed in this chapter, including the work of budding developers on Newgrounds and the work of guildmasters on Neopets. Moreover, just as Kücklich ultimately makes the argument that "modders are also in a unique

[21] Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter, Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games, Electronic Mediations 29 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xv.

[22] Ibid., xxx.

[23] Julian Kücklich, "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," *The Fibreculture Journal*, no. 5 (2005).

position to challenge the way we think about the relationship between work and leisure in the post-industrial age, and to explore new modes of non-alienated labour,"[24] so too would I argue that free distribution opens up a potential site of change for the video game industry and also a potential to re-imagine game development labor.

Value and Identity

Under capitalism, the relationship between labor and paid commodities is clear. In *Capital*, Marx splits the value of the commodity into two categories: use-value and exchange-value. Use-value is the capacity to satisfy some aspect of human want or need, or the utility of the commodity. As Marx sees it, the use-value of the commodity exists outside of the system of capital. Things have always had a utility as long as human beings have made things, and that utility is a direct result of the labor having gone into the object, regardless of how or whether it is being sold. This labor, then, is equal between commodities. Marx writes "with reference to use-value, the labor contained in a commodity counts only qualitatively."[25] Exchange-value, on the other hand, is quantitative. It is the expression of value in relation to other commodities, or, in practice, between commodities and money. This value is built on the value of its constituent commodities as well as the labor power that goes into making the commodity. Marx argues that for exchange-value to exist, labor must be abstracted in order to be itself understood as valuable. He argues "human labour creates value, but is not itself value. It becomes value only in its

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Ernest Untermann, vol. 1 (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1909), 52.

congealed state, when embodied in the form of some object."[26] Therefore, the circulation of commodities standardizes their values and also creates a basic formula where the exchange-value of a commodity is the value of its material components and its labor. But laborers are paid an hourly wage set by their employers based on the standard rate of labor, not based on the value their labor contributes to the commodity. The difference between the exchange-value of the commodity and the wages given to the laborers is known as surplus-value and is converted into capital for the owner of the means of production of the commodity. This is the basis for the economics of capitalism.

But the circulation and production of commodities does not solely produce economic surplus value in terms of capital. Arjun Appadurai uses the term "regimes of value" to argue that the circulation of commodities encompasses shared value systems that go beyond the economic yet also influence the value placed on the commodity, implying that additional forms of value are circulated and created through the vector of the commodity exchange in addition to the commodity itself.[27] In other words, the exchange of commodities can produce value that is not itself economic, such as social capital. The labor provided in making free games supports the idea that there is some other kind of value that is being extracted from the labor. For my purposes, the circulation of the video game commodity, especially in free distribution, creates additional regimes of value that are not economic but instead operate on the level of affect, social capital, and affect. At the same time, the playing of free games also creates its own value. Here I would like to argue that games are particular as media commodities in that each play session is

[26] Ibid., 59.

[27] Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Ethnohistory Workshop, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 15.

unique to the player or players who participate in it and is therefore not transferable between players. The exchange-value of the commodity is augmented through the use-value that stems from the player's unique attachment to the game. Though many media objects lend themselves to play on the part of fans, games are the only ones that necessitate it. As Matt Hills has argued from Adorno's conception of play, use-value and exchange value cannot be separated from each other. He writes that "the fan's appropriation of a text is therefore an act of 'final consumption' which pulls this text away from (intersubjective and public) exchange-value and towards (private, personal) use-value, but without ever cleanly or clearly being able to separate out the two."[28] In other words, play fundamentally changes the value of an object. One of the goals of this dissertation will be to consider how and if the use-value generated through play can contend with, complicate, or ignore the exchange-value of the video game commodity or audience commodity and therefore the governing logics of capital.

Yet, just as the circulation of commodities produces value systems additional to capital, so too does labor produce non-economic value. The labor of identity regulation and affective comfort through performance creates its own kind of value which nevertheless is not exchangeable through its attachment to a commodity. Quite often, affective labor is often a key component of the creation and maintenance of identity. Meg Wesling describes "those activities that work toward the aims of the body's comfort, pleasure, and the satisfaction of desire …[which] might usefully be understood as a form of self-conscious labor that produces value" as "affectively necessary labor," borrowing a phrase from Spivak.[29] Some labor produces a kind of "queer value" that generates affective capital necessary to feel comfortable with one's identity.

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[28]Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 10.

[29] Meg Wesling, "Queer Value," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 1 (November 1, 2012): 108.

Kevin Floyd argues that the performance of gender identity can be seen as a kind of "labor without capital" which simultaneously reproduces and is alienated from the social constructions that necessitate it.[30] The gender structures that we take for granted as natural are actually built upon the labor of gender identity performance. Indeed, just as labor cannot be separated from the affective regulation of gender, so too is it inseparable from the formation of identity categories. John D'Emilio argues in "Capitalism and Gay Identity," for example, that the particular social formations of capital engendered the creation of a gay identity that wasn't always already present in history:

> gay men and lesbians have not always existed. Instead, they are a product of history, and have come into existence in a specific historical era. Their emergence is associated with the relations of capitalism; it has been the historical development of capitalism-more specifically, its free labor system-that has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar men and women, and to organize politically on the basis of that identity.[31]

An important step in this dissertation is acknowledging the ways in which certain abstract identity categories such sexuality, race, and gender are articulated through gaming labor, but also the ways in which more individualized identities such as gamer, troll, developer, and others are wholly fabricated through the orientation of individuals to the game commodity online and the labor taken in creating a community of like-minded individuals. For media and cultural studies scholars, identity and the cultural understanding of identity categories are not fixed ideas but rather are unstable and constantly shifting through the process of identification, which is always

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[30] Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 95.

[31] John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 468.

already historically contextual.[32] The signifiers of gender, for example, have often been theorized to shift based on social and cultural contexts. Judith Butler writes that "gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts."[33] They go on to argue in Bodies That Matter that other axes of identity, including and especially race, factor heavily into the performed construction of identity, its limits, and its possibilities.[34] In order to understand the complicated matrices of factors at play in identification through labor, we must consider the society- and community-level constraints and expectations that influence the process.

Identity is always already intimately bound up with technology. Technology is used as identification to others, as a personality modifier, and to help shape and morph bodies. Slack and Wise argue that identity is best understood as an assemblage, an accumulation of technological, societal, corporeal and cognitive elements which come to cohesively create the self. Moreover, though all technology plays a part in identity, the multi-faceted identification structures located in the internet and digital technologies compound its effects. User identity, Slack and Wise write, is "in this case an assemblage of bodies, devices, data, and ideologies of individualism, self-reliance, and efficiency. It is an assemblage that renders aspects of identity quantifiable, visible, circulatable, and analyzable."[35] The way users utilize video game and online platforms is not

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[32] Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *Modernity and Its Futures*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992).

[33] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[34] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex.* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[35] Jennifer Daryl Slack and J. Macgregor Wise, *Culture and Technology: A Primer*, Second edition (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 208.

simply a set of behaviors. It is a performance that sediments actions and data into identity. In fact, we ought to pay attention to the specific ways in which technologies hail users *as* a specific identity, or more tellingly disallow the use of that identity. What can we learn about the creation of norms within a society by studying the technologies that society produces and the ways that those norms inform identity? If indeed the use of technology constitutes a performance, it is a performance that shapes the very subjectivity of its performer. Butler's conception of performativity illustrates the way that persistent uses of technology can inform identity:

> I would suggest that performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms...this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo.[36]

Key to this understanding is the way in which performativity functions is to stress the repetition of acts as a crucial sedimentation of subjectivity, and that this repetition is culturally enforced through prohibition and taboo, as well as the normalization of the act itself. This is not to say that interpellation is the end result. Rather, and often for queer people specifically, the act of interpellation presents a norm that can be negotiated or resisted.

Game scholars are positioned to offer unique insights into this process. Amanda Phillips argues that gameplay replicates many of the same social structures as the performance of identity. She writes that "the act of playing a video game creates similarly troubled circuits of performance and identity formation, some of which rely on the emergence of a coherent category, 'gamer,' against which critics and other outliers may be judged."[37] In other words,

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[36] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 95.

[37] Amanda Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 12.

much of the identification process of "gamers" involves the specific stylization of the act of gameplay onto the pre-structured identity and community politics surrounding gaming culture. This process can illuminate the larger process of the performance of identity more generally. Moreover, the act of gameplay is faciliatory to the process of identification on a large scale. Games provide players a space to understand their own identity thought the corporeal, affective, and ludic aspects of gameplay. Pushing back against popular accounts of gaming that stress the assumed negative effects of violent gameplay, Adrienne Shaw argues that "games' ludic as well as bodily and socially interactive aspects result in players identifying as themselves rather than with their characters/avatars."[38] The technological and ludic constraints of games do not shape identity but rather are used as tools through which the performance of identity is embodied.

In fact, the shared understanding of these constraints shapes communal as well as individual identity. The gamer identity is predicated on a shared relationship to and value structure surrounding gameplay. Through the participation in gameplay more generally, but also meta conversations specifically, every player is actively involved in the construction of group identity through the political valences of play. For example, Mia Consalvo has considered the role of cheating in game spaces. "Code is law and constructs the rules of the game, she writes, "but for game players, this rule of law is not a hidden construction, and is also, for some, open to question and even alteration."[39] Cheating is not as an objective act of "breaking the rules," but rather an agreed-upon convention of breaking the spirit of a community. In fact, "cheater" as an

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[38] Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 98.

[39] Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, First MIT Press paperback edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009), 85.

identity is seriously open to interpretation. Rather than clear rules that dictate whether something like a mod or an exploit is "allowed," cheating is instead actively and continually being defined collectively by a gaming community. So even breaking or bending the rules of gameplay (the "mechanics") does not necessary mark a player as a cheater. Instead, it is a collective conversation and open interpretation that does so. It is this flexibility toward digital games that leads McKenzie Wark to call gamers "theorists," noting that "the gamer as theorist might look toward a transformation of what matters within gamespace, a style of play that edges away from agon, distinction, decision, the fatal either/or. Because after a while it's just no fun."[40] Cultural scholars of identity, then, can understand identification as occurring within a pre-inscribed set of rules, but that can always be re-interpreted, bent, or flat out ignored, and that it is only the group that can decide whether this qualifies as legible in the context of a collectively understood identity. Internet technologies in general and web games in particular become malleable tools through which users can define themselves vis-à-vis their relationship to the technology. If, as Wesling suggests, the affective value in labor can stem from its utility in building a comfortable and joyful identity, then understanding the relationship between games and identity is crucial for understanding their value generation.

Methods and Methodologies

Game studies provides a unique and useful lens for understanding the historical construction of identity through labor on the internet. As game scholars Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett put it, "the centering of gaming culture around technology means that the

[40] McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 97.

shared identity of gamers is defined in the publicly mediated intersection of social networks."[41] Key to this dissertation, then, is the understanding of the games in context with the platforms that they exist upon. Tarleton Gillespie reminds us that despite its trappings and conventional use, a platform is not a neutral term. Platforms in their default state connote openness, accessibility, neutrality, and the ability to elevate a user to be able to execute a specific task (like host a YouTube video or write a Steam comment). But platforms are not neutral. They carry with them not only layers of cultural baggage, but also the need to fit the demands of users, advertisers, copyright holders, and of course the corporation responsible. Platforms are inherently political. Gillespie writes that "what can appear, how it is organized, how it is monetized, what can be removed and why, and what the technical architecture allows and prohibits, are all real and substantive interventions into the contours of public discourse."[42] This dissertation will read the interventions Gillespie describes in order to understand the ways in which they discursively and technologically shape identity.

But critical internet studies is not the only source of scholarship to think through platforms. Game studies and software studies also consider platforms as a methodological foundation. Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort imagine platform studies as a mode of investigating the relationships between software, hardware, and culture. Though the "platform studies investigates the relationships between the hardware and software design of computing systems (platforms) and the creative works produced on those systems, which include but are not limited

[41] Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, "Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 3 (July 2012): 401, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.705199.

[42] Tarleton Gillespie, "The Politics of 'Platforms,'" *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (May 2010): 350, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738.

to video games—digital art, electronic literature, recreational and playful programs, and virtual environments are all built upon platforms, too."[43] In other words, platform studies pays particular attention to the construction of the technological apparatuses on a micro-level, from the circuitry to the manufacturing to the programming. As Bogost and Montfort acknowledge, different platform studies will emphasize different technological and cultural points and tensions, but "they will be united in being technically rigorous and in deeply investigating computing systems in their interactions with creativity, expression, and culture."[44] This methodology requires paying specific attention to the design and construction of video game hardware (cosmetic design, circuitry, inputs and outputs, etc.) and software, as well as the ways in which the design of these technological systems are culturally produced, and how they influence and produce culture and therefore identity. In the case of online games, we ought also to consider distribution platforms as a crucial part of the cultural meaning and legacy of software and game commodities. This chapter utilizes platform studies to think through not only the games themselves but also how the platform on which they are distributed affects both the games and the labor of game-making. Apperly and Parikka expand on Bogost and Monfort to argue that platform studies is a specific kind of media archaeology that creates an epistemic threshold, meaning that it creates new sites of meaning outside of the historical vs contemporary binary. In other words, in doing platform studies, scholars are not only investigating platforms but also solidifying them in the historical imagination and always already contextualizing them with their

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[43] Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort, "Platform Studies: Frequently Questioned Answers," in *Plenaries: After Media — Embodiment and Context* (Digital Arts and Culture Conference, University of California, Irvine, 2009).

[44] Ibid.

legacies.[45] I am also interested in feminist and queer interventions into platform studies.[46] As Caetlin Benson-Allott argues in her exploration of platforms, "lack of attention to materialism in game studies has been a lack of attention not just to chips and wires but to the relation of chips and wires to other things."[47] Platform studies ought consider not only the material aspects of the platform itself, but also the way that the platform interacts and engages with other platforms and the spaces and materials around it, as well as the bodies of the people who use it. On a further level, we might consider how infrastructures such as race, gender, and sexuality construct and are constructed by the platform.[48]

I would merge the critically-focused platform studies exemplified by Gillespie with the more technologically grounded platform studies found in game studies. In doing so, I hope to investigate how the designs of platforms and portals not only enables specific kinds of game development and labor but also how they enable cultural formations and discourses. In order to read platform interface discursively, I will often utilize the method of discursive interface analysis described by Mel Stanfill. They explain that the affordances of platform interfaces such as buttons and menus introduce discursive norms that produce a "common sense" about what

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[45] Thomas Apperley and Jussi Parikka, "Platform Studies' Epistemic Threshold," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 4 (June 2018): 349–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015616509.

[46] See: Aubrey Anable, "Platform Studies," *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 135–40, https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2018.4.2.135.

[47] Caetlin Benson-Allott, "Platform," in *Debugging Game History: A Critical Lexicon*, ed. Henry E. Lowood and Raiford Guins, Game Histories (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT press, 2016), 346.

[48] See: Tara McPherson, "U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and UNIX," in *Race after the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2012), http://site.ebrary.com/id/10535025, Laine Nooney, "A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History," *Game Studies* 13, no. 2 (December 2013), https://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney, Jacob Gaboury, "A Queer History of Computing," *Rhizome*, February 19, 2013, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/feb/19/queer-computing-1/.

users do and should do on the platform.[49] But it is not just the interactive elements on the interface that produce meaning on websites. The visual language of the site, its aesthetic forms, and the established trends therein also demonstrate the norms and values of the users and creators of a site. As Lisa Nakamura writes, "performing close readings of digital visual images on the Internet and their relation to identity, itself now an effect as well as a cause of digitality, produces a kind of critique that takes account of… media-based activity."[50] In order to fully understand the creation of identity online, then, we must analyze not only the affordances but also the content of the web.

The web can be a challenging object of historical study. Because it changes so rapidly and its archives are not always complete, an archival approach alone is not always sufficient. In addition to the textuality of the site itself as covered by Stanfill, Niels Brügger argues that web researchers must also analyze its media environment and its textual environment.[51] Contextualizing the "text" of the website within the larger media environment of the internet is important in explaining the individual and communal value associated with these sites. Lisa Gitelman writes that media are "socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation."[52] If websites and platforms are the

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[49] Mel Stanfill, "The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 7 (August 2015): 1061, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814520873.

[50] Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, Electronic Mediations 23 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 11.

[51] Niels Brügger, "Website History and the Website as an Object of Study," *New Media & Society* 11, no. 1–2 (February 2009): 119, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444808099574.

[52] Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006), 7.

technological forms of the internet, then user and designer behavior shape its protocols. To understand these protocols, this dissertation will combine close textual analysis of websites and games with information about the behavior and motivations of the people who interact with them. For this I will analyze contemporary news articles, forums, and interviews, and archives made in official capacities by platforms but also in unofficial capacities by fans. Archives, as described by Zeb Tortorici, are produced by the desire to archive and hold affective weight even at the level of their organization and what kinds of information they include.[53] I will hold the same consideration toward affective motivations as I move throughout archival spaces. What things are being archived and who is doing the archiving, as well as the archived materials themselves, help to paint a fuller picture. Considering the curation and construction of archived materials will be key to my dissertation moving forward. Together, this represents a disruption to traditional archive-based methods of web history by introducing the component of cultural memory in making historical arguments.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is divided into five chronological chapters, beginning in the 1980s and moving into the present. Each chapter will focus on the relationship between a specific kind of labor and value system as a result of the free distribution of video games. They will each utilize a case study that stands in not only for the state of free games on the internet at the time but also represents a specific way in which free games challenge the traditional model of video games as

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[53] Zeb Tortorici, *Sins Against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 8.

commodities that generate value from being bought and sold. For example, while chapter 1 will focus on the charityware distribution model as activist labor for software in the 80s and 90s, chapter 3 will focus on children's game platform Neopets to understand the allure that the commodity audience for free games at the time had on advertisers and media conglomerates. There may be some overlap between case studies, for example the ways in which community was built on Neopets for queer youth through free audience labor echoes the way that queer activist development in the 80s and 90s helped shape communities on bulletin board systems. But all of the case studies demonstrate the relationship between free online games as a distribution model and the generation of value in free development.

Chapter 1 tracks the history of the charityware model of distribution from its roots in 1980s software sharing. It asks what the history of this distribution model was, and how it created value outside of the donations themselves, especially for queer folks. Before the introduction of the world wide web in 1993, networks like BBSs, MUDs, and Internet Relay Chat boards (IRCs) were the primary way that average users were able to interact with each other online.[54] Of particular interest to me is the history of sharing software through computer networks for free. These types of software were known as shareware or freeware and were either entirely free or initially free with different models of payment. This transformative model of being able to share software digitally opened both the development and the use of software to many who would not otherwise be able to engage with it. This chapter began with a primary case study of the game *Caper in the Castro*—a game developed by CM Ralph that is widely considered to be the first widely-distributed queer video game—to consider the ways that queer

[54] Christina Ortner, Philip Sinner, and Tanja Jadin, "The History of Online Social Media," in *The SAGE Handbook of Web History*, ed. Niels Brügger and Ian Milligan (London ; Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2019), 374.

developers used the charityware model to use their labor as activism to create a system of mutual aid in their communities. What became necessary for this chapter was a critical investigation into the history of this model. I find that, contrary to the dominant narrative that charityware was started by Dutch software developer Braam Moolenar as a way to fund his charity efforts in Uganda, charityware was actually developed as a model by several queer developers, most notably Canadian gay liberation activist Roedy Green ten years before Moolenar ever used the model. This demonstrates the utility in investigating the real histories and motivations behind the free distribution of games and software, and the alternate systems of value produced in the use of free labor to create social change through game development.

Chapter 2 investigates this history of Flash games online through a study of the gaming and animation platform Newgrounds. By the time Newgrounds was created, the web had bifurcated into two business models: e-commerce and entertainment. e-commerce depended on the sale of goods and services online as a funding method, while entertainment sites' primary revenue was banner advertising. Though the former is often implicated in the dot-com bubble which characterized the history of the internet at the time and became the prime example of 90s and 00s internet aesthetics, the latter continued to innovate the uses and look of the web. This was characterized by third-party plugins and platforms like Macromedia's Flash Player which enabled far more content to be accessible on the internet than had been in the past. Flash made game development and animation much easier and integrated well with free portals to host games and videos democratized free online distribution. I argue that the democratization of game development on a platform like Newgrounds also brought to the forefront certain identity and behavioral markers of the primarily young, white men that dominated the web—namely, troll culture. Newgrounds provided freedom for experimentation in both subject matter and form, and

also facilitated a kind of developmental labor where new game creators could hone their talents. That freedom, however, was not distributed equally among demographics but instead both implicitly and explicitly centered the perspectives of young, white, males, including cultures of misogyny, homophobia, and trolling. While Newgrounds was a great proving ground for new talent, it was not amenable to women or queer developers, and this lack would go on to have a huge impact on the gaming industry, especially in independent spaces.

Chapter 3 will continue to focus on Flash games, this time in the context of online games marketed toward children and the speculative craze by conglomerates as a result of their popularity. At this point the online gaming audience had become an increasingly valuable market for media corporations looking to expand into the digital marketplace. In this chapter I will consider the proliferation of these gaming sites and their consequential impact on the way that digital games are understood today. Beginning in 1999 with Cartoon Network Games and Neopets the same year, other children's networks began to consider digital games as a potential source of revenue and synergy. Companies began using free digital games as an additional way of attracting kids to their media properties and provide another platform for advertisers to spend their money. This chapter considers the popular gaming website Neopets, which was purchased by media conglomerate Viacom in 2005 for $160 million. It details strategies taken by corporations to sell games to children in an era where the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) prevented targeting ads to children. Neopets CEO Doug Dohring developed an approach he called "immersive advertising" to circumvent these restrictions. At the same time, because of the openness of the Neopets platform, children on Neopets were given a lot of freedom to create their own experiences on the site through guilds, chat boards, and aesthetic play. These experiences often gave children space for the exploration of their queer and gender

nonconforming identities. Ultimately, sites like Neopets represented both the exploitation of a child commodity audience and a horizon of opportunity for self-expression and discovery.

Chapter 4 explores the state of free online games after the death of Flash, particularly through the burgeoning queer games scene of the time. In 2010, Steve Jobs published "Thoughts on Flash," in which he announced that Flash would not be supported on the iPhone.[55] This effectively killed the platform and brought web development into a frenzy as game makers sought a way to continue their livelihoods. Free browser games continued, however, and as platforms like itch.io, Unity, and Twine made it increasingly easy to distribute free games outside of Flash portals, new communities began to form around game development. The primary case study for this chapter is the network of queer independent games that developed in the early 2010s. I investigate both the platforms on which these games were created as well as their distribution and the games themselves. I argue that the queer games movement redefines value in game spaces not only through unique design decisions but also by using unique platforms and through the clever utilization of free distribution. The case studies in this chapter are Porpentine's Twine work, specifically *How to Speak Atlantean*; Stephen Lavelle's *Slave of God*; and Robert Yang's *Radiator 2* trilogy of *Hurt Me Plenty, Stick Shift, and Succulent,* as well as *The Tearoom.* I consider these games in the context of larger discourses in the queer games movement around alternative forms of value for the video game commodity, notably gift giving and the generation of cultural and subcultural capital.

Finally, Chapter 5 will center on App development as a mode of free game distribution through platforms like Apple's App Store and the Google Play Store. Specifically, it will focus

[55] Steve Jobs, "Thoughts on Flash," Apple.com, April 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20100707013305/https://www.apple.com/hotnews/thoughts-on-flash/.

on the racialized distinction between free-to-play and ad-driven apps from developers in East and Southeast Asia and the single-pay release models more popular in Western countries. Crucially, the historical difference between app developers from the Global North and app developers from the Global South has often been portrayed as one of a gap in innovation, where specifically Chinese and Southeast Asian developers simply copy American and Japanese inventions. As *The Telegraph*'s Margi Murphy put it, "the idea that 'China can't innovate' is pervasive and persistent in America."[56] (2020). I find that this techno-orientalism which sees Chinese and Southeast Asian developers as incapable of creativity is echoed in the American and British gaming press. The case study for this chapter is Dong Nguyen's *Flappy Bird,* which was released in May of 2013 and found immense popularity later that year. Despite this accomplishment, Nguyen's creative labor was framed in the gaming press as derivative, shoddy, and even pure theft. They accused him of stealing assets, using bots to review the game unfairly, and delivering a poor product unworthy of its success. Ultimately, I see the US gaming media's mistreatment of *Flappy Bird* as an aesthetic judgment on Nguyen's labor in an attempt to legitimize the role of the gaming media as a tastemaker and the gaming industry as fair and legitimate.

I will conclude by considering the labor necessary for preserving, archiving, reconstructing, and maintaining the free games discussed within the main chapters. What motivates these archivists, who are largely volunteers? Here, I consider the role of nostalgia in the video game commodity, its limitations, and its possibilities. This labor may be looking at the past as its object, but its value is in what is at stake for the current and future relationship between free games and labor. Here I am thinking with authors like Svetlana Boym, who argues

[56] Margi Murphy, "How Silicon Valley Turned Imitation into the Most Insincere Form of Flattery," *The Telegraph*, August 8, 2020, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2020/08/08/silicon-valley-turned-imitation-insincere-form-flattery/.

that nostalgia is a multifaceted affect that can simultaneously reinforce or combat hegemonic notions of culture and nationhood. It is my hope that, in thinking through the value generated in free games, future scholars may have the tools to identify the radical queer potential in everyday gaming experiences.

Chapter 1: Volunteer Labor in the Charityware Distribution Model

The original idea for this chapter was to investigate a specific example of free game distribution—the charityware model utilized by CM Ralph in *Caper in the Castro*. This is still the case, and I am invested in the re-orientation of labor value that occurs when media workers volunteer. But upon investigating this specific case I noticed a larger relationship between queer identity and the free distribution of software that has been overlooked in its technological history. In particular, though the popular press has framed charityware as well-meaning straight male developers attempting to make a difference in the world by asking for charitable donations for ostensibly underserved charities, we could understand charityware as having been pioneered specifically as a queer distribution model. In this case, as I will argue, the charityware model has earlier, more activist roots before it was utilized by philanthropic developers for broader charity work. In a sense, there are two charitywares, operating on different assumptions about its audience and different systems of value and different forms of labor. I would call these systems activist labor and philanthropic labor.

This chapter will describe the relationship between free labor and the free distribution of software commodities for the purpose of encouraging donations to a philanthropic organization or noteworthy cause. Often, these games take the form of "charityware," a distribution model where developers request or require payment to a charitable organization in exchange for the software. From the beginning of shareware in the 1980s to the present trend of charity bundles, game and software developers have been donating their labor to benefit their communities and the world. Investigating this process reveals a larger relationship between changing economic and cultural values behind the software commodity as free online distribution became possible. The development of charityware practices in the late 1980s created a framework for using digital

labor as a form of charitable contribution and community building which continues into the present day. The ability to share games for free allowed a wider variety of people to join in the gaming community and share their vision without necessarily worrying about profit. In other words, this new distribution widely facilitated the reframing of value systems around game development. It also enabled coalition building across geographical space through the games. In particular, this chapter explores the relationship between queer communities and charityware to argue that free labor of game development created value through community development and coalition building—a value made possible through avenues of free online distribution. Together, this value represents a specific form of activist labor, an undertheorized form of volunteer labor that I will define and situate among the variations of free labor generally.

To understand charityware, I will investigate two historical narratives concerning the development of the term. The first is the conventional story of charityware, centering around Bram Moolenaar's development of the text editor Vim and his work with children in the Ugandan village of Kibaale in 1993. The second is the less reported invention of the term developed by gay rights activist Roedy Green in the early 1980s and whose licensing policies take a decidedly more political valence than Moolenaar. Though both are stories of charityware and both are examples of what labor historians would call volunteer labor, I will argue that the former represents philanthropic labor while the latter represents activist labor. The legacy of these frameworks for distribution can be seen in the historical trajectory of digital volunteerism—philanthropic giving on one hand and affinity-based coalition building on the other. This coalition building continued with charityware games which were released with the specific intention of activism. The earliest of these are *Caper in the Castro*—widely considered to be the first queer video game—and its heterosexual twin *Murder on Mainstreet*, both designed

by CM Ralph in 1989 on HyperCard for Apple Macintosh computers. While *Murder on Mainstreet* was released commercially through Heizer Software via catalog, *Caper in the Castro* was released for free via BBS as charityware. Ralph's desire to perform this work as an act of communal labor for the LGBT community demonstrates the affective value of games online at this time. We might understand this as a form of volunteer labor that is rooted not only in the perpetuation and maintenance of online communities, but also of the larger nascent online LGBT community. At the same time, the specific changes that Ralph put into place in order to make the game more marketable to software licensors demonstrate the tenuous position that queer content existed in at the end of the 80s. The success of Caper in the Castro was due not only to Ralph's labor, but also to the work of the administrators of BBSs like Fog City and the Gay and Lesbian Information Bureau (GLIB). Understanding Caper as a case study puts into focus the changing labor formations that began as queer communities moved into digital spaces. Building on this, games such as 1992's *GayBlade* demonstrated the commercial viability of queer games while at the same time continuing to build communal value and support through profit donation. *Caper* also sets the stage for the continuation of queer communal practices in relation to other freely distributed games, such as *ZZT* in the 90s, twine games in the 2010, and tabletop games in the present day. The rest of the chapter will connect those practices to the generation of value first demonstrated by *Caper*.

Volunteer Labor, Philanthropy, and Activism

Like other chapters in this dissertation, part of the work of this chapter is to investigate where value is created in the distribution of free commodities through the use of free labor. In this case, it becomes necessary to distinguish the multiple valences of value being generated

volunteer labor. This can be understood as both exchange-value and use-value, but also non-economic functions of value such as social capital and affect. More than just free labor, Scholars have long considered the role of unpaid labors of care in value generation in both a media and non-media context. In the case of charityware, we could understand it as a labor of care. Historically, unpaid care labor has been considered the realm of women in the context of capital. In his discussion of the social division of labor, Engels writes "The first division of labour is that between man and woman for child breeding…the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male."[1] By this, he means that the unpaid and unacknowledged domestic labor done by women (primarily in the context of giving birth and raising children) is exploited by men. Reproductive labor, being necessary for the continuation of the capitalist system where the bourgeois exploit workers in exchange for profit, is extremely valuable under capitalism but is also unpaid and represents an additional site of exploitation. Marx, for his part, is attentive to the "necessary labor" that represents the required amount of work necessary to produce enough value to justify wages.[2] The labor done beyond this necessary labor is "surplus-labor" and is the driving force behind the economic logic capitalism.[3] In this individualistic analysis of workers, though, Marx ignores the larger social circumstances that make this relationship possible. The labor required to sustain those workers also contributes to surplus value, but is not taken into account. This labor, often domestic in nature, is still in and of itself labor that produces value under capitalism. Lise Vogel argues, then, that necessary labor actually has two components: the

[1] Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (London: Electric Book Co., 2001), 79.

[2] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward B Aveling, vol. 1, 3 vols. (London: Electric Book Co., 1998), 312.

[3] Ibid., 313.

social, and the domestic. She writes that domestic labor "is the unwaged work that contributes to the daily and long-term renewal of bearers of the commodity labor power and of the working class as a whole."[4]

In the context of media, Tiziana Terranova uses the idea of reproductive labor to consider the work of digital moderators and internet volunteers in the production of economic value in the new internet economy. Using the categories created by Fast et. al, the labor of creating a media commodity whose profits are donated to charity would probably qualify as a combination of a few categories: The Volunteer, who donates their labor for a common good; The Hobbyist, whose motivation for free labor includes affective benefits and fun; and The Carer, whose labor is primarily "reproductive" and represents "free labor that is emotional, community oriented, and often gendered."[5] I would call this kind of work "activist labor" to account for the simultaneous volunteer labor for a cause, hobbyist labor of incorporating previous skill, and care labor of community management and the building of affective coalitions and relationships.

The second issue, and one that is more closely applicable to the goal of understanding activist labor, is the desire of the authors to separate use-value and exchange-value in their typology of free labor. On a base level, this is unnecessary because the creation of a commodity explicitly generates both use-value (qualitative utility of an object) and exchange-value (abstracted value of the labor through the exchange of money for the object). In the case of service labor, it does become more complicated. Fast et al. argue that volunteer labor does not always clearly meet the definition of labor because it often only creates use-value. They write:

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[4] Lise Vogel, "Domestic Labor Revisited," *Science & Society* 64, no. 2 (2000): 151–70, 161.

[5] Karin Fast, Henrik Örnebring, and Michael Karlsson, "Metaphors of Free Labor: A Typology of Unpaid Work in the Media Sector," *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 7 (October 2016): 963–78, 968.

> The most well-known examples would probably be the work done to develop open-source resources (e.g. operating system Linux, Firefox, etc.) and open access resources (e.g. wikis, creative commons, open access academic journals, etc.). However, as these phenomena are meant as alternatives to commercial equivalents, it could be argued that they generate use-value rather than exchange value, which in turn would make it problematic to speak of these cases as labor.[6]

This is a thorny proposition. On one hand, it is true that many open access resources such as the freeware discussed later in this chapter are built as alternatives to commercial resources. But just because an organization is a non-profit and doesn't charge money for the use of a product (as is the case with Mozilla and Firefox, for example) doesn't mean that it operates outside the realm of capital. These organizations still need money, and donated labor offsets the need to pay for those donated services and instead allows organizations to pay for material needs like supplies, infrastructure, and overhead. The abstraction of labor into exchange-value is still necessary in this case whether or not it results in the creation of an exchangeable commodity, yet this is not treated as labor per se.

In fact, volunteer labor has often been excluded from the history and theorization of labor. Such histories often prioritize paid work to in order to consider the relationship between labor and the generation of excess value under capitalism. Melanie Oppenheimer in particular has noted not only the general lack of attention to volunteer labor in labor history but also to the particular lack of feminist historical and theoretical attention to volunteer labor, perhaps due to the association of volunteerism with the dichotomous labor structure implicitly tied to sex under capitalism (that is, men working outside the home to provide income and women working unpaid reproductive labor in the private sphere).[7] Volunteer labor is understood to exist outside of the

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[6] Ibid., 971–972.

[7] Melanie Oppenheimer, "Voluntary Work and Labour History," *Labour History*, no. 74 (May 1998): 4.

system of capital that drives waged labor. Nevertheless, as Cora Baldock argues, volunteer labor is part of the capitalistic value system insofar as it replaces or complements waged labor. On the topic of social welfare volunteering, she writes "I maintain that volunteer work is part of this work organisation, and that volunteer work in social welfare is an unwaged extension of the paid labour market in which female volunteers…form flexible and expendable pools of labour, available to take up volunteer work when governments reduce expenditures."[8] There is no doubt that volunteer labor generates value. In the United States, not only is volunteering a major contributor to the economy, but the system of volunteering operates on an implicit value system where opportunity cost of volunteers relative to charitable contributions produces value for charities.[9] . Because of these connotations, volunteers are often alienated from the economic value their labor provides. Research suggests that ¾ of volunteers either are unable to assign a monetary value to the work they provide, or significantly undervalue it.[10]

What is volunteering? An oft-cited definition from John Wilson is "any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization."[11] This is a good baseline, but it doesn't take into account the historical motivations for volunteering, which are often separate from the other kinds of free labor described by fast et al. The impetus for volunteer labor emerges from the Victorian ideas of social responsibility which stressed philanthropy and self-improvement.[12] In this case, philanthropy is the general love of mankind and the desire to

[8] Cora Baldock, "Feminist Discourses of Unwaged Work: The Case of Volunteerism," *Australian Feminist Studies* 13, no. 27 (April 1998): 28, https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.1998.9994884.

[9] Richard B. Freeman, "Working for Nothing: The Supply of Volunteer Labor," *Journal of Labor Economics* 15, no. 1 (1997): S165.

[10] Freeman, "Working for Nothing," S158.

[11] John Wilson, "Volunteering," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 215.

[12] Oppenheimer, "Voluntary Work and Labour History," 2.

improve society. Therefore, it is important to note that volunteer labor is also "generally associated with the improvement of the community, and society at large."[13] The primary motivations for volunteer labor is altruism, but other motives include "social interaction, using and developing skills for paid employment, and personal growth."[14] Currently, popular neoliberal discourses of volunteering stress "giving back" and that volunteer labor is a payment for some kind of debt owed to society, or is the price we pay for being a good citizen. Discourses of citizenship veil the economic worth of volunteer labor and frame it as an individual responsibility or decision rather than working within larger systems. But because the benefits of volunteering are often seen as individualized, despite the purpose of the work being to help society, volunteer labor can often be self-actualizing, or what Hesmondhalgh and Baker refer to as "good work." Based on their work with volunteer fire departments, Thompson and Bono argue that volunteering can sometimes provide volunteers "a means to struggle against the alienation in capitalist society, providing an arena of relatively unalienated, or self-actualizing endeavor."[15] The value generated by volunteer work in any capacity can be economic for the charity, organization, or cause and affective for the volunteer.

Still, much of the literature on volunteer labor primarily focuses on philanthropic work; that is, volunteering to benefit a charity or organization that represents a cause important to, but nevertheless detached from, the individual doing the work. In most cases, the philanthropist volunteers from a place of privilege and is therefore affectively distanced from the cause. In the United States, it conjures images of wealthy individuals who decide to spend their fortunes on

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 3.

[15] Alexander M. Thompson III and Barbara A. Bono, "Alienation, Self-Actualization, and the Motivation for Volunteer Labor," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 24, no. 2 (1992): 114–23.

the public good. Such figures include Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, and John D. Rockefeller in the twentieth century; Bill and Melinda Gates, Oprah Winfrey, and MacKenzie Scott in the present. But philanthropy is not the only model for social change or magnanimity. Activism is another lens in which the social action undergone through volunteer labor can be understood. Both can be forms of charity, which is, generally, "generosity and helpfulness especially toward the needy or suffering," and often more specifically the gift of time or money to a charitable cause.[16] Literature on volunteer labor does little to differentiate the two. In order to understand the differences between the two I will unpack the scholarly debates surrounding both concepts, their purposes, and their definitions. My purpose in doing so is not to delineate what labor counts as philanthropy and what counts as activism, though I will attempt to separate them to a degree. Rather, my goal is toaddress what I see as an oversight in the scholarship on volunteer labor, that is, a flattening of two different kinds of activity into one.

The scholarly definition of philanthropy varies wildly, depending largely on the context in which the concept is being leveraged. This has led to various debates as to the precise boundaries of philanthropy, especially in sociology, and to Siobhan Daly classifying Philanthropy as an "essentially contested concept," meaning that by its very nature and lack of a stable definition it necessarily creates debate.[17] The concept began as a general term meaning "love of humanity" but later evolved to have a meaning more closely aligned with charity. As Marty Sulek explains, there are a few popular schools of thought surrounding the definition of philanthropy to which the community of "philanthropy studies" scholars subscribe. Arguably the

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[16] *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Charity," accessed July 13, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charity.

[17] Siobhan Daly, "Philanthropy as an Essentially Contested Concept," *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 23, no. 3 (September 2012): 535–57, 537.

most popular of these schools is Lester Salamon's 1992 definition of Philanthropy as the private giving of time or valuables (money, security, property) for public purposes" and later as "one form of income of private non-profit organizations."[18]. This definition of philanthropy is more or less synonymous with charitable giving and stresses the relationship between the public and the private sectors, i.e., names philanthropic organizations as competitors or supplements to public aid through government programs. This definition also precludes labor as a possible outlet of philanthropy. But other academic definitions account for volunteer labor as a part of philanthropy. One is Jon Van Til's 1990 definition of philanthropy as "the voluntary giving and receiving of time and money aimed (however imperfectly) toward the needs of charity and the interests of all in a better quality of life."[19] In either case, the important component parts of philanthropy are the redirection of private resources toward public ends, the structuring of resources through organizational means, and the moral obligation to help the less-fortunate.

For many scholars and in the popular imagination, the philanthropical body par excellence is the foundation, which collects money and deals it to causes where appropriate, acting as a private version of a governmental budget. This leads to an understanding of philanthropy as somewhat removed from the issues that it tackles, regardless of what percentage of the money actually reaches its intended charitable target. Moreover, philanthropy studies scholars have argued that foundations have "engaged in a pattern of giving that reproduced social inequalities rather than upended them" and "deploy their funding in ways that direct recipients

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[18] Lester Salamon, as quoted by Marty Sulek, "On the Modern Meaning of Philanthropy*," Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (April 2010): 201.

[19] Jon Van Til, as quoted by Ibid., 202.

away from radical activities and goals."[20] Modern forms of philanthropy are often also contextualized within the realm of products or celebrity endorsement. This has led to a critique by Nikel and Eikenberry of what they call "marketized philanthropy." They argue that, though philanthropy may have some liberatory potential, "emerging forms of marketized philanthropy depoliticize discourse by collapsing the distance between the market and the negative impacts it has on human well-being, thereby stripping philanthropy of its transformative potential."[21]

Like philanthropy, activism is a somewhat contested concept both in society writ-large and in academia. Martin et al define activism as "everyday actions by individuals that foster new social networks or power dynamics."[22] They see activism as a pre-emptive step toward political action, but not necessarily a political action in and of itself. This idea is not without its own ambiguities. Feminist scholars in particular debate which actions count as activism, a categorization which is somewhat fluid depending on the perspective of the scholar. While theorists like Patricia Hill Collins argue that simple existence is activism for Black women, others like Jayne Stake see activism as something rooted more particularly in education and solidarity.[23] On the other hand, some scholars argue that activism is a public and necessary component of political action and, in particular, revolution. Marcelo Svirsky argues that activism is the component of political action which necessitates engagement with the world outside of the

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[20] Emily Barman, "The Social Bases of Philanthropy," Annual Review of Sociology 43, no. 1 (July 31, 2017): 283.

[21] Patricia Mooney Nickel and Angela M. Eikenberry, "A Critique of the Discourse of Marketized Philanthropy," *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 7 (March 2009): 975.

[22] Deborah G. Martin, Susan Hanson, and Danielle Fontaine, "What Counts as Activism?: The Role of Individuals in Creating Change*," Women's Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 3/4 (2007): 79.

[23] Catherine Margaret Orr, "Activism," in *Rethinking Women's and Gender Studies*, ed. Catherine Margaret Orr, Ann Braithwaite, and Diane Marilyn Lichtenstein (New York: Routledge, 2012), 87–88.

political group in order to effect social change. He writes, “activism infuses the concept and practice of revolution with an incessant discomforting movement that helps to protect new revolutionary forms of organisation from the dangers of stratification and its oppressive side effects.”[24] In other words, activism is the public-facing component of revolutionary political movements that creates cohesion within political movements through the dialectic.

One key difference between activism and philanthropy is in the intentions behind it. In her book on Asian American media activism, Lori Kido Lopez defines activism as “intentional participation in a political act designed to remedy a social injustice.”[25] Still, understanding what qualifies as a political act is less clear. I would add to Lopez’ definition that activism must also contain an ethos that is specifically meant to challenge entrenched systems of power. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards describe activism as “consistently expressing one’s values with the goal of making the world more just.”[26] The invocation of consistency by Baumgardner and Richards implies a lived-in quality that is unique to activism, also implied by Stake and Collins. . Once again I would refer to Meg Wesling’s use of the term “Affectively Necessary Labor,” to explain a form of labor whose value rests not in the economic but in the satisfaction of affective needs.[27] Activism in the form of charitable giving might also be understood as mutual aid, which Dean Spade defines as “a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for

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[24] Marcelo Svirsky, “Defining Activism,” *Deleuze Studies* 4, no. Supplement: Special Issue on Deleuze and Political Activism (2010): 168.

[25] Lori Kido Lopez, *Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 24.

[26] Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Grassroots: A Field Guide for Feminist Activism*, 1st ed (New York, N.Y: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 19.
[27] Meg Wesling, “Queer Value,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 1 (November 1, 2012).

[27] Meg Wesling, “Queer Value,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 1 (November 1, 2012).

caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable."[28] So while activism can and does often take form in giving time and resources, the motives and relationships involved differ. Activist goals include changing the specific political and social conditions related to their cause in addition to making the current world more survivable.

Understanding the scholarly debate around these concepts points to several differences between activism and philanthropy. The natural result of philanthropic labor is to raise money and the natural result of activist labor is to build affective and communal bonds. This is not to say that philanthropy is not interested in community or that activism is not interested in economics, which would be untrue. Rather, that which separates the two labors is the relationship of the volunteer to the beneficiary. Philanthropy is definitionally a top-down structure for enacting social change. It relies on the reification of class distinctions through the act of giving. For this distinction, I rely on Paulo Freire's discussion of the difference between philanthropy and liberation. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he writes

> Any attempt to "soften" the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their "generosity," the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well… True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity."[29]

This understanding of philanthropy as necessarily contributing to the stratification of social classes mirrors arguments by scholars like Nikel and Eikenberry. This is not to say that activism

[28] Dean Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity," Social Text 38, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 136.

[29] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed (New York: Continuum, 2000), 44.

is always inherently on the side of the oppressed. Many right-wing activist groups, also operate on affinity-based coalition building structures in order to right what they see as a societal wrong. Hilary Pilkington has argued that right-wing activism also has an "affective as well as ideological dimensions."[30] Nor is it to say that philanthropy cannot provide good for a community. Raising money for cancer research, or public libraries, or any number of causes is a worthwhile endeavor. Nevertheless, the form of philanthropy as volunteerism does not embody the same tendency toward reshaping structural power as activism.

Free Software

There are several variations of freely distributed software. Freeware is the use of free models of distribution to release free, open source software. Shareware, a concept built onto freeware, is "programs can be copied freely, generally without source code, but not used continuously without paying for them. The requirement to pay may be motivated by a limited functionality, being sent annoying messages, or the mere appeal to the user's ethic"[31]. Charityware, or careware,[32] is a specific version of shareware which asks the user to donate to a charity. In *The New Hacker's Dictionary,* Eric S. Raymond defines charityware as "A variety of shareware for which either the author suggests that some payment be made to a nominated

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[30] Hilary Pilkington, "Why Should We Care What Extremists Think? The Contribution of Emic Perspectives to Understanding the 'Right-Wing Extremist' Mind-Set," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 51, no. 3 (June 2022): 325, https://doi.org/10.1177/08912416211041160.

[31] Jesús M. González-Barahona, Joaquín Seoane Pascual, and Georgio Robles, *Free Software* (Barcelona: Open University of Catalonia, 2010), 11.

[32] Both charityware and careware have been used by different authors and developers since the late 1980s and early 1990s respectively, however I will refer to both using the term charityware for purposes of clarity and consistency. Careware has the benefit of being a play on the term "shareware," but charityware is a much more consistently used term and as far as I can tell predates careware by at least three years. At the same time, careware is also a brand name for a heavily used HIV information and support software and information about that term is difficult to come by due to the software dominating search results.

charity or a levy directed to charity is included on top of the distribution charge."[33] This is either a specific charity or, in the case of *Caper in the Castro*, a general appeal to donate to a specific cause. Some other developers are more vague with their requests. Arachnophilia developer Paul Lutus asks users to "stop whining" in order to use his software, calling his software careware despite attachment to a cause or organization. Specifically, he writes "so here is my deal: stop whining for an hour, a day, a week, your choice, and you will have earned your copy of Arachnophilia. Say encouraging words to young people, make them feel welcome on the planet Earth (many do not). Show by example that we don't need all we have in order to be happy and productive."[34] Here, Lutus is demonstrating an important aspect of charityware that I think clarifies the non-economic systems of value that the charityware distribution model demonstrates. In any case, charityware is usually released for free with the ask that the user make a charitable donation or change their actions in some way, not the demand.

Indeed, the charityware market is as much of an affective marketplace as it is a monetary one. Lutus acknowledges that even in the absence of monetary exchange the charityware economy is nevertheless transactional. He writes four main points which demonstrate his theory:

- Economic principles lie behind many more human activities than most of us realize. We are almost constantly exchanging something for something else.
- Many economic transactions don't involve money. In traditional societies, and sometimes even this one, people trade using favors, influence, even pure ideas, instead of money.
- Sometimes money is not the best way to convey value. And sometimes money is so completely inappropriate that it destroys the transaction. CareWare is one of those transactions.

[33] Eric S. Raymond, ed., *The New Hacker's Dictionary*, 3rd ed (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996).

[34] All four bullet points are direct quotes from: Paul Lutus, "The CareWare Idea," www.arachnoid.com, October 25, 1996, https://web.archive.org/web/19961025035805/http://arachnoid.com/careware/.

- CareWare doesn’t involve money, but it is a transaction nevertheless. Something is delivered, something is received. Adam Smith's invisible economic hand moves through the CareWare economy just like everywhere else. I can't ask for something more than I am giving, but I can ask for an appropriate exchange.[35]

In this and other discussions of the charityware model, there is a clear sense of what I would call an affective mode toward the distribution of software. Even software that asks for donations to specific charities nearly always frame it as an optional decision on the part of the user, but with the implication of fulfilling some kind of altruistic obligation to the developer.

Charityware as Philanthropy

There is relatively little historical discussion of the creation of the charityware model. By far the most consistently referenced software in relation to the charityware model in both academic and non-academic literature is the popular text editor Vim (short for Vi Improved). Vim was originally released by Dutch software developer Bram Moolenaar as a clone and later an improvement on the Unix program vi, developed by Sun Microsystems co-founder Bill Joy in 1976. Its first commercial release was as a part of Fred Fish disk #591 on a freeware license. This license changed after Moolenaar’s first volunteer trip to Uganda in Summer of 1993. In the release notes of version 2.0 of Vim, Moolenaar makes his first request for money. Specifically, he asks that the user consider donating to the charity in Uganda that he works with, in partnership with the Dutch branch of the International Child Care Fund (ICCF) and World Vision. He writes, “Vim is public domain. If you are happy with Vim and want to express that, don't send me

[35] Ibid.

money. I don't need it. But I know a place where they do need your money. Please read on."[36] Specifically, he asks that users donate to a specific project caring for orphaned children in the town of Kibaale. Many of the children lost their parents to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Moolenaar continues:

> Kibale is a small town in the south of Uganda. It is an area that is suffering from AIDS very badly. About 30% of the adults are infected. Because parents die, there are many orphans. They need a lot of help. The Kibale children centre is working hard to provide the needy with food, medical care and education…This is the best charity program I have ever encountered.[37]

It is clear that Moolenaar is passionate about his charity, and he has continued to support the ICCF and Vim into the present. There is a persistent tone of philanthropy and genuine concern in Moolenaar's writing about Uganda.

Moolenaar's use of Vim as a lure for donations is demonstrative of the philanthropic approach to charityware. Vim itself has little relevance to Rather, Moolenaar uses his experience as a software developer to support a charity that he stumbled upon but wants to help. More accurately, ICCF Holland is a charity started by Moolenaar, and in which he remains the treasurer to this day. Even though he remains removed from the daily operations of the charity, discussions of the organization always center Moolenaar key to the work being done. In a 2001 profile on Moolenaar in *Linux Journal*, interviewer Wayne Marshall writes "Bram continues his personal involvement with Kibaale to this day, having made return trips in 1996, 1998 and 2000. This experience gives Bram a thorough grounding in the realities of life in Africa, as well as an

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[36] Bram Moolenaar, *Vim: Vi IMproved*, version 2.0, AmigaOS (Venlo, The Netherlands, 1993).

[37] Ibid.

understanding of the means of effecting meaningful change."[38] There is little doubt that Moolenaar's work in Kibaale has made a huge difference in the lives of the people living there. At the same time, ICCF Holland was part of a larger trend of volunteer tourism that does little to reimagine the balance of power between the Global North and the Global South. I would argue that Moolenaar and ICCF Holland is demonstrative of the relationship between volunteer tourism and neocolonialism in the global south. Despite philanthropy being a force for good, we should be mindful of whether it reinforces extant power dynamics. As Ranjan Bandyopadhyay puts it, "volunteer tourism is one such contemporary issue where religion and white supremacy, similar to paternalist imaginary, which focuses on European mainstream cultural values, continue to play an important role in consoling and exploiting the Global South."[39] In his many discussions of Kibaale on the Vim website, Moolenaar has very little to say about his Ugandan counterparts on the ground, instead tending to focus on other Dutch volunteers or their Canadian counterparts who also manage a clinic in the town. He also appears to have little vision for the future of the community. For instance, when Marshall asks Moolenaar what he thinks about the digital divide, he answers, "I'm afraid I don't know what the digital divide is. Is it about bringing computer-related stuff to Third World countries? Well, the area around Kibaale first needs a good water supply and a phone."[40] On the one hand, Moolenaar is correct in some ways that material needs should be considered ahead of less urgent infrastructural concerns like internet access. On the other, this statement reveals a paternalistic attitude toward Uganda with a limited view of its

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[38] Wayne Marshall, "Algorithms in Africa | Linux Journal," *Linux Journal*, June 1, 2001, https://web.archive.org/web/20120721132048/http://www.linuxjournal.com/article/4657?page=0,3.

[39] Ranjan Bandyopadhyay, "Volunteer Tourism and 'The White Man's Burden': Globalization of Suffering, White Savior Complex, Religion and Modernity," *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 27, no. 3 (March 4, 2019): 327–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1578361, 328.

[40] Marshall, "Algorithms in Africa."

future. We might imagine how ICCF Holland could incorporate the voices of local Ugandans and imagine its future together. Ultimately, this was the 90s and work in global development has changed since then. Rather, this story functions as part of the project of understanding the historical foundations of this branch of charityware.

At any rate, according to many sources, Moolenaar is referred to as a "pioneer" of charityware. This is a story that is perpetuated in no small part by Moolenaar himself. In the first issue of *Free Software Magazine*, he writes "I didn't really need extra money myself and didn't like the idea of some people giving me money for a program that is free. That's when I thought of the Charityware concept."[41] Later, in an interview for software services provider evrone, he claims "I decided to combine my desire to help poor children with [software programming] and Charityware was born."[42] Several other charityware releases followed, most benefitting specific charities to which the developer has no relationship other than philanthropic. Some notable examples include Colin Garbutt's game *Kye* which benefitted the Save the Children Fund, Anthony Andersen's screen saver program ScreenPeace which benefitted Greenpeace, C E Steuart Dewar's DateBk which benefitted the Dewar Wildlife Trust, and Matt Stokes' game *Spades*, which benefitted the homeless services agency Covenant House.[43] All of these examples extend the charityware-as-philanthropy model where developers are able to feel good about donating their labor to a cause, and users can feel good about donating to causes while receiving

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[41] Bram Moolenaar, "Vim, an Open-Source Text Editor," *Free Software Magazine*, January 15, 2002, https://web.archive.org/web/20020502183659/http://www.rons.net.cn/english/FSM/issue01/vim.

[42] evrone, "Vim Creator Bram Moolenaar Interview," accessed May 5, 2022, https://evrone.com/bram-moolenaar-interview.

[43] Jack Schofield, "Microfile," *The Guardian*, January 6, 1994; Jack Schofield, "Taking Software on Trust," *The Guardian*, May 30, 1991; Art Kramer, "Atch - The AJC's Daily Online Guide," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 18, 1997.

a piece of desired software in the process. This is not to say that the charityware model exemplified by Vim is not actually benefiting those in need. By all accounts, the voluntary nature of Vim's model still raised funds in the thousands of Dutch guilders which directly benefitted the village of Kibaale. The model that these software developers represent, however, exemplifies the distanced affect that characterizes philanthropy.

This approach to charityware, in which media workers use their skills for the purposes of supporting charities which nevertheless remain somewhat affectively detacthed for both developer and user, is demonstrative of philanthropic media labor. Moolenaar relies on the white savior narrative around Uganda to engender support for his charity through the ostensibly Western audience that is using his software. But he is not alone in his use of "first-world" guilt to motivate action in the charityware model. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Paul Lutus explained that his idea for his "stop whining" software was based on his travels sailing around the world. He said,

> One time in Sri Lanka, I went to leave my garbage in the dumpster at the marina that served Americans and Europeans. There was a line of men from the village waiting for what we threw out. They re-used everything, including our plastic garbage bags. One of them was a man I played chess with, but I never heard him complain about his life. It made me think about how many people back home were causing themselves a lot of grief by whining all the time.[44]

In this way, too, Lutus is setting up an assumed position for the user that is one of privilege that has the burden of philanthropy. The appeal for users to "not whine" in order to access a software commodity demonstrates what Evgeny Morozov might call "slacktivist" approaches to

[44] Steve Ditlea, "Sailing Solo Around the World Inspired Pioneer's Anti-Whining 'Care Ware,'" *The New York Times*, August 23, 1996, Online Edition edition, sec. Technology, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/cyber/week/0823lutus.html.

philanthropic work.[45] Moolenaar, for his part, often stresses that even if the user chooses not to donate, just considering the cause is a great way to pay off the charityware "debt." But aside from the facile often ineffective slacktivism that simple calls to action or "awareness" discourses bring to a cause, the application of slacktivism to the global south risks doubling down on the white savior complex that Bandyopadhyay warns about vis-à-vis volunteer tourism. The ease at which digital humanitarianism enables tangential interaction with a cause facilitates what Bhakti Shringarpure calls the "digital savior complex." She argues:

> Digital humanitarianism…reinforces the divide between those doing work on the ground and those who choose to contribute, help, save while being far from the reality of the events. To that end, it not only transforms extraordinary crises into quotidian cyber realities but also furthers the distance between the savior and the saved by demanding that individuals click, like, tweet, share and donate.[46]

The affect of beneficence toward charitable work widens the perceived gulf between the philanthropist and the beneficiary, and this is often compounded by the relative ease that slacktivist modes of engagement have provided. The distancing of philanthropic media labor often replicates the Victorian ideal of charity by demarcating boundaries between the user and the cause or idea, replicating the noblesse oblige attitude that comes with doing philanthropic work.

Charityware as Activism

The story goes that Bram Moolenaar invented a distribution model for free software known as charityware, where the proceeds would benevolently go to his charity of choice, and

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[45] Evgeny Morozov, "From Slacktivism to Activism," *Foreign Policy*, September 5, 2009.

[46] Bhakti Shringarpure, "Africa and the Digital Savior Complex," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 32, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 178–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2018.1555749, 2.

that several developers followed suit. But this story is only one version of events. The history of charityware is more complicated than that narrative suggests. The term charityware was widely used in both niche software publications and the general press years before Moolenaar made his way to Uganda. It appeared as a feature in software columns in *The Guardian* in both May and November of 1991.[47] CM Ralph used the term to describe *Caper in the Castro* in 1989. Even in Fred Fish's freeware release disks, a program released as "donationware" appeared in June of 1992.[48]As I researched this chapter, it quickly became a source of concern that there was no verifiable history regarding the origin of the charityware model. Even the Wikipedia article for careware falsely ascribed its origins to a 1988 Al Stevens column (the column was actually published in 1991).[49]

So, in light of the inconsistency in crowdsourced histories of the charityware model, the following is another version of the development of the idea. Software developer and Internet Press Guild founder Ross M. Greenberg released a development diary for an update of his 1987 antivirus software FLUSHOT+ in the summer 1988 issue of the hacker quarterly *2600 Magazine*. To begin, Greenberg explains the shareware model that FLUSHOT + was released under. He writes "the right to use FLUSHOT + is contingent upon you paying for the right to use it…this entitles you to get the next update shipped when available. And it allows you to pay me, in part, for my labor in creating the entire FLUSHOT series."[50] Updating his previously used shareware model, Greenberg adds a charitable component to the license. He continues, "I've

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[47] Schofield, "Taking Software on Trust," 1991.

[48] Fred Fish, "Fish Disks 1 - 1000," Amiga Stuff, March 3, 2001, http://www.amiga-stuff.com/pd/fish.html.

[49] Al Stevens, "C Programming," *Dr. Dobb's Journal*, August 1, 1991.

[50] Ross M. Greenberg, "A Solution to Viruses," *2600: The Hacker's Quarterly*, 1988, 29.

created an alternative…I'll call it "charityware" [first called that, to my knowledge, by Roedy Green]. You can register FLUSHOT + by sending me a check for $10 made out to your favorite charity. Be sure to include a stamped and addressed envelope. I'll forward the monies onto them and register you fully."[51] This statement is notable for several reasons. Firstly, in contrast with most of the previously discussed charityware releases, Greenberg is not invested in a specific charity. Rather, he endows the user with the agency to choose their own favored organization. Though this distribution model is still arguably philanthropic in scope, it shows the potential for charityware not just to raise money for specific charities, but to have a specific political potential that might cross into activism. Secondly, this is the only example of a developer extending another person credit for the creation of the idea of charityware, this person being Canadian software engineer Roedy Green.

Because of Greenberg's attribution in his article, we can attribute the first known use of the term charityware to Green. Roedy Green is a software developer and activist based out of British Columbia who runs a company called Canadian Mind Products. He was a leader of the Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movement of Western Canada in the late 60s and early 70s. He began organizing campaigns by writing to posters of gay and lesbian personal ads in the *Georgia Straight* in 1969 and soon expanded into publishing.[52] In 1971 Green grew the campaign to publish a guidebook to being gay in Canada called *A Guide for the Naïve Homosexual*. He became chairperson of Vancouver-based Gay Alliance Toward Equality (GATE) in the same year. On 28 August, 1971—in his capacity as chairperson—Green led a demonstration at the

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[51] Ibid., 30.

[52] Donald W. McLeod, *Lesbian and Gay Liberation in Canada: A Selected Annotated Chronology, 1964-1975* (Toronto: ECW Press/Homewood Books, 1996), 44–45.

Vancouver Courthouse in support of the We Demand march which sought to update Canada's anti-sodomy laws.[53] Though the law had been changed in 1969 to decriminalize some instances homosexuality, it did not produce a material impact in the lives of average gay Canadians, and in fact caused increase police harassment and scrutiny on gay men.[54] Together, these marches were the first public political demonstrations by gay rights activists in Canada.

Green continued to work as an engineer during this time. As internet use grew among tech users, he began to circulate software on floppy disk and through BBS. He continues to do so today, where most of his software is freeware that has a suggested donation, essentially classifying it as charityware. Though he does not use the word charityware specifically, he did design a data entry program called Abundance specifically for charity work in 1981.[55] This is the earliest example I could find of a piece of software designed for charitable purposes. He continues to release software under the charityware model, and each one has an optional paypal link with the message "If the CMP utilities solved your problem, please donate a buck or two, or donate to one of the charities featured in the footer public service ads throughout the website and get a tax receipt… Full source included. You may even include the source code, modified or unmodified in free/commercial open source/proprietary programs that you write and distribute. Non-military use only."[56] Though Green releases his software under a charityware model, he is much more political in his approach than Moolenaar and the like. Specifically, he has one large caveat to the free use of his software, which is that it cannot be licensed for military use. This has

[53] Ibid., 69.

[54] The Arquives, "1971 We Demand March," The Arquives Digital Exhibitions, accessed May 6, 2022, https://digitalexhibitions.arquives.ca/exhibits/show/1971-we-demand-march/introduction.

[55] Roedy Green, "Abundance," *Byte: The Small Systems Journal* 11, no. 10 (October 1986), http://archive.org/details/byte-magazine-1986-10.

[56] Roedy Green, "Non-Military Use Only," accessed May 6, 2022, https://www.mindprod.com/contact/nonmil.html.

been true since he released Abundance. He writes “I am providing gifts that took much more labour to produce than you would ever guess and I believe I have the right to decide whom I want to give them to. I consider military use considerably more egregious than theft. To me, it is the same as if you forced me to kill a child. You put blood on my hands.”[57] It is obvious that, like Greenberg, Green has a particular relationship to the value generated by his labor. But Green aligns his value much more with his particular modes of activism.

What happens when the narrative surrounding the inspiration for and legacy of charityware changes? How can we understand it differently when the model pioneered by Roedy Green is considered to be the default? I think the difference is one of positionality, matching the philanthropic/activist split. I don’t think it’s inaccurate to argue that Green’s positionality as a gay anti-war activist in the hippie era contributed to the development of the charityware model, if he is indeed the creator of the form (certainly he is *a* creator). His software ethos is evocative of the Baumgardner and Richards’ definition of activism as one of constantly expressing moral values. In “A Queer History of Computing,” Jacob Gaboury considers the personal narratives of several gay men who were instrumental in the history of computing. Through weaving their personal narratives with the computing achievements that they pioneered, he argues that the queerness of these men was intrinsic in the technologies they developed. “The insistence on not only the importance but broad relevance of an affective sexual archive is fundamental to this history,” he writes, “Thus, this is not a reinterpretation of history, or a queering of computation. Rather it is an insistence on the queer as it exists and has always existed within them.”[58] Just, as Gaboury argues we cannot separate Christopher Statchley’s queerness from the parodic form of

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Jacob Gaboury, “A Queer History of Computing,” *Rhizome*, February 19, 2013, 5, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/feb/19/queer-computing-1/.

his love letter generator, so too would I argue that Green's queerness—and in particular his affective attachments—are crucial to the charityware form. This is a relationship that has been solidified throughout continued queer use of this distribution form.

Queer Games, Queer Distribution

CM Ralph began developing *Caper in the Castro* in 1988—the same year that Ross Greenberg credited Roedy Green with coining the term charityware. Widely understood to be the first LGBTQ game, it was released through BBS (specifically the Fog City BBS in San Francisco) services as an adventure game for the Mac Plus application HyperCard in 1989. The game revolves around a murder mystery where drag queen Tessy LaFemme has gone missing. The player acts as Tracker McDyke, attempting to solve a kidnapping in which the most likely perpetrator is notorious fiend and villain Dulligan Straightman. *Caper* was released on a charityware model. They ask that the user donate to the AIDS charity of their choice if they enjoyed playing the game.

It is clear that Ralph's experiences as an activist in the queer community shaped both the development and distribution of *Caper*. They explain that *Caper* was built out of a love for the queer spaces of their home in the bay area:

> I was so overjoyed and overwhelmed by the freedom and welcoming we experienced…here in Nothern California – once I decided to create a game I knew it would be dedicated to the community that I had found here…At the heart of the community was San Franciso's Castro District. My partner and I would travel to The Castro just about every Sunday for brunch and people watching… The characters in the

> game are just roughly-hewn, and embarrassingly badly stereotypical caricatures of people I'd observed."[59]

HyperCard was not a system designed for making games. Rather, it was an index and database platform that used a system of cards, called stacks. Using it to make a game was a creative augmentation of the capabilities and limits of the software. Ralph dubs this practice "subversive re-assignment,"[60] but we might also understand it as similar to queer gaming practices of defamiliarization which Naomi Clark argues open games to "more liberatory possibilities."[61]

It is also worth noting the game's position specifically as a part of Ralph's history of activism. According to the release notes for the game itself, Ralph's work "has spanned some 20 years and includes such notables as the design of the AIDS Response Program logo for Southern California's Orange County chapter, along with much donated work for many other nonprofit Gay and Lesbian Organizations. This game…follows in this tradition of works for the Gay and Lesbian community."[62] Because of this activism history, it's no surprise that *Caper*'s charityware license asks users to donate to an AIDS charity. In addition to the goal of raising money, the game has an affective component. Ralph describes it as a memorial to the 90% of friends that they lost to HIV and AIDS in southern California.[63] The game's content itself has also been read as a commentary on lack of governmental action or sympathy during the AIDS crisis,

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[59] CM Ralph, "Answering Some Questions About Caper in the Castro," CMRalph.com, June 28, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20200831051056/https://cmralph.com/2020/06/28/answering-some-questions-about-caper-in-the-castro/.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Naomi Clark, "What Is Queerness in Games Anyway?," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 4.

[62] CM Ralph, *Caper in the Castro*, Mac Plus (San Francisco: CM Ralph, 1989).

[63] Adrienne Shaw, "Caper in the Castro," *LGBTQ Video Game Archive* (blog), August 23, 2015, https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/2015/08/23/caper-in-the-castro/.

specifically one scene in which the character drinks tainted wine and the screen reads "The House Wine has been tainted with a deadly, fast-acting bacterial virus. You are about to die and there is no antidote. Sorry."[64] This dialogue ensures that the game is read as not only the first queer game but also a sardonic commentary on what it meant to be queer at the time.

Ralph would later sell a version of *Caper* to mainstream publishers as *Murder on Mainstreet*, a "straight" version of the game that had any references to queerness scrubbed. It is worth noting in explicit terms that the queer version of the game was charityware, meant to create community engagement to the AIDS crisis, while the straight version of the game was sold more straightforwardly as a commodity. I think this lends to a reading that *Caper in the Castro* was a more overtly political statement, fitting our definition of activism. It also demonstrates the ambivalence of free distribution that will continue in the dissertation; Ralph released the queer version of the game as an act of love, but the straight version is the one that actually made them money. What also strikes me about the history of queer developers and activism is that what is often understood as the second widely-released queer game, Ryan Best's *GayBlade* released in 1992, mirrors much of Ralph's story. It too was released almost on a whim, and it made supporting queer charity part of its distribution model. According to a review from the *Village Voice*, the game was a straight RPG that Best's queer friends asked him to make gay.[65] Best donated part of the profits of *GayBlade* to gay and lesbian charities. In both cases, queer developers used their games for the benefit of their communities.**Conclusion**

In "Wampum as Hypertext," Angela Haas makes the argument that many of the structures and systems we associate with the development of hypertext and the world wide web were developed much earlier by indigenous communities in the Americas, specifically through the use of wampum belts. She writes "American Indian communities have employed wampum belts as hypertextual technologies—as wampum belts have extended human memories of inherited knowledges through interconnected, nonlinear designs and associative storage and retrieval

[64] Stacey Henley, "Never Mind The Last Of Us, Here's The Real Game With The First LGBT+ Protagonist," *USgamer* (blog), July 7, 2020, https://www.usgamer.net/articles/the-last-of-us-lgbtq-games-caper-in-the-castro-feature.

[65] Joe Clark, "Dungeons and Drag Queens," *Village Voice*, July 13, 1993.

methods—long before the "discovery" of Western hypertext."[66] She concludes her article that she is not reinventing the definition of hypertext, but rather adding perspective and character to a history that has largely excluded certain voices. In the same way, I hope that my exploration of the charityware concept serves to complicate and nuance both the story of the distribution model itself and how we map the relationship between voluntary labor and free games.

Explicitly juxtaposing the approaches of Bram Moolenaar and CM Ralph can provide a bit of a taxonomy to distinguish philanthropic labor from activist labor. This is not to say that philanthropic and activist labor are always so easily distinguishable, and there would certainly be overlap. The comparison, however, provides points of reference for when we might use which framework to think through different forms of voluntary labor, which until this point has largely been treated as one category in the literature. While Moolenaar's focus was on a specific charitable organization that he had a stake in, Ralph's instructions were to donate to any HIV/AIDS organization. This gives Ralph's user a bit more agency over where their funds are going and, presumably, able to help in a more targeted way toward a specific community. While Moolenaar's experience designing *Vim* is based on sympathizing with the poor in Uganda, Ralph's experience with *Caper* is based in their specific lived experience working with HIV/AIDS charities as a queer person in California. In other words, Moolenaar's philanthropy represents a concerned outsider whereas Ralph's activism is that of communal solidarity. This also fits with the previous descriptions of activism and mutual aid being more interested in the destabilization of structures of social inequity, whereas philanthropy is at best agnostic toward those structures. In summary, philanthropic labor tends toward specific private organizations,

[66] Angela M. Haas, "Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 19, no. 4 (2008): 77.

sympathetic but distanced giving, and a lack of intentionality toward revising social hierarchies, while activist labor tends toward issue-based giving, causes that are specific to the lived experiences of the laborer, and the destabilization of marginalizing social structures.

It's worth noting that the charityware model of games has not gone away. It is still extremely popular on platforms like itch.io, for example, whose lower fees and easy setup attract marginalized developers. Two notable recent examples would be the 2020 and 2022 charity bundles benefitting racial justice and trans youth respectively. These two releases also exemplify but also complicate the two modes of voluntary labor discussed in this article. The Bundle for Racial Justice and Equality was an extremely successful game bundle that raised over $8 million for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Community Bail Fund.[67] The vast majority of the games in this bundle were not by Black developers and represented more of an outsider's perspective on racial justice. But while the games and developers may not have represented the Black community, the organizations they chose were more active mutual aid resources which is characteristic of activism. This shows the potential for philanthropic action that is intentional in its approach and deferential to the needs of a community in crisis. The TTRPGs for Trans Rights in Texas! Bundle, on the other hand, raised about $400,000 for the Transgender Education Network of Texas and Organización Latina de Trans en Texas.[68] Unlike other activist projects, such as Ralph's, this project directs the money toward specific organizations. Still, most of the games in this bundle came directly from trans and queer game

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[67] Nick Statt, "Itch.Io's Amazing 1,500-Game Charity Bundle Surpasses $5 Million Goal," *The Verge*, June 11, 2020, https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/11/21287909/itch-io-bundle-for-racial-justice-equality-five-million-dollar-goal-hit.

[68] Bryan Lawver, "'We Need to Stop This Now': How Tabletop RPGs Raised $350,000 for Trans Charities," *Inverse,* March 23, 2022, https://www.inverse.com/gaming/trans-rights-texas-itch-game-bundle-interview.

designers and the organizations felt very targeted in their approach to mutual aid for a specific community. In an interview with Inverse, bundle creator Rue Dickey explained, “my first gut response was to feel rather helpless. It's so far away, and I can't possibly go help the trans kids there as a single person…I really admire the work itch has done with bundles for racial justice, for Palestine and Ukraine. So I thought, maybe I can do that for the trans community in Texas.”[69] Here, a trans game designer worked with other designers as a matter of affective motivation to make a difference. Moving forward, understanding the distribution of software commodities for charity ought to be considered in light of the larger systemic power and the motivations and desires of the laborers.

[69] Ibid.

Chapter 2: Semi-Amateur Development Labor on Newgrounds

On August 7th 2002, game developer Tom Fulp and animator Dan Paladin released *Alien Hominid* on the platform Newgrounds. Newgrounds is a free, web-based platform devoted to sharing animation, games, music, and art and was (not coincidentally) founded by Fulp in 1995. The game is a colorful run and gun shooter in the vein of games like *Contra* and *Metal Slug*. In it, the player controls an alien whose ship has crash-landed on Earth and who is on the run from the FBI. Gameplay includes dodging bullets, shooting FBI agents, jumping onto buildings, and bisecting enemies using the alien's claws. It was an instant success on the platform, having been played over 21 million times on the site. Due to the success of the game, Fulp and Paladin incorporated as the game development company The Behemoth, which would go on to release an expanded, paid, physical version of *Alien Hominid* for PlayStation 2, Xbox, and GameCube in 2005. This version of *Alien Hominid* won three awards at the 2005 Independent Games Festival (IGF). Reporting for *Kikizo*, Alex Wollenschlaeger wrote "everybody loves a winner, which is why Zoo Digital is trumpeting *Alien Hominid*'s sterling performance at the recent Independent Games Festival Awards, held this past week in San Francisco. The colourful, alien-themed, 2D action game picked up three awards, including for Innovation in Visual Arts, Technical Excellence and an Audience award."[1] Since then, it has been re-released multiple times, and The Behemoth has gone on to develop other successful games including the successful *Castle Crashers,* which was released on the Xbox Live Arcade in 2008. As a result of the game's success, Fulp's website Newgrounds was held as a bastion of game development and innovation. The fact that Fulp could release a small free Flash game online that could eventually be

[1] Alex Wollenschlaeger, "News: Alien Hominid Takes Three at IGF Awards," *Kikizo*, March 16, 2005, http://archive.videogamesdaily.com/news/200503/070.asp.

transformed into both a critically and commercially successful was great news for developers who wanted to work outside of the traditional game publishing industry. Developers could release games for free on the site and get instantaneous feedback on what worked and what could be improved. At the same time, Newgrounds had something of a culture problem. It had a reputation for intense sexism, racism, and homophobia both in the content published on the platform and from the comment sections and message boards. It also had no standards for content published on the site, leading to the portal being absolutely filled with pornographic and graphically violent games. The site was free in multiple senses: free to play and free to distribute, but also virtually free from censorship or content moderation.

This chapter is a tale of two Newgrounds. On the one hand, it is a successful platform that built a community around Flash games and launched many careers in game development that permanently changed the industry. On the other, it is an unrestricted and unregulated frontier where the majority rule very often facilitates racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Though these descriptions may sound contradictory, they are both accurate and both indicate the ambivalence and nuance with which stories about the early web ought to be told. In this chapter I will acknowledge this ambivalence with the goal of examining precisely what the implications are that such a well-loved site also exhibited such problematic content. In fact, the popularity and success of Newgrounds is largely due to the same factors that encouraged the proliferation of sexist, racist, and pornographic games: the mechanism by which anybody could upload any game, and the immediacy by which that game could be judged and lauded by the community on Newgrounds for better or worse. It is this duality that enabled the site and also which made it an actively hostile place for creators who didn't already fit in with its unique sensibilities.

Understanding the particulars of the Flash game development community, of which Newgrounds was a primary nexus, is crucial not only for marking a particular time in gaming history but also for understanding the impact of free online games on the video game industry to the present day. The fact that games could be released for free to a mass audience and in a relatively quick time meant that developers could iterate and improve on their games, build skills necessary for game development through practice and critique, and build an audience for their work which they could then redirect to their own sites or use as leverage in negotiating with publishers or platforms. This chapter will focus on the duality of Newgrounds to make two central claims. First, the freedom, accessibility, and community provided by Flash and Newgrounds as platforms had a significant impact on the video game industry through the creation of a cottage industry approach to video games. The labor performed on and around Newgrounds is a variety of speculative game development labor which was supported by a community of developers in a kind of advisory capacity, and which focused primarily on the development of creativity and skills for the promise of future success. Second, access to that kind of aspirational labor system was not equally available to everybody, based on factors such as gender, sexuality, race, affect, and sensibility and was in fact actively hostile to certain kinds of work and certain individuals. Ultimately, I argue that while sites like Newgrounds had an intense impact on the gaming industry and made game development more accessible, the particular audience of that site reinforced a singular vision of what the labor of game development looks like and who was allowed to be a game developer. This was exemplified through the kinds of games that existed on the platform, as well as the community itself and how that community utilized the affordances the platform of Newgrounds to reinforce those existing boundaries around value and game development. In some ways, comparing a new internet platform to the

"Wild West" is a bit trite. But for Newgrounds, those comparisons are apt. Not only was Newgrounds free in the sense that nobody had to pay to post their games or to play them, but it was also free in the more libertarian sense, where there were very few laws and regulations governing it. It was also a platform where users could stand to gain quite a bit of money, should they be lucky enough in their endeavors to win the favor of Newgrounds' notoriously fickle audience. And, also like the Old West, Newgrounds' freedom came at a cost to women and people of color, who often had to occupy marginalized positions within the social fabric of the platform, if they were allowed at all.

Thus, the freeness of Newgrounds' speech was just as important to its free games as the price tag. As *Paste*'s Javy Gwaltney argues, the free nature of Newgrounds gave rise to innovative game experiences like *Distance* and *The Majesty of Colors* on one hand and controversial troll games like the racist caricature *Telebubby Funland* and the suicide bomber game *Kaboom!* Gwaltney writes about the site,

> At its worst, Newgrounds was Baby's First Rebellion all the way through to its dick-jokey core. And yet in *spite* of all this, the site remains important in the history of video games… giving artists a space, with nearly no restrictions, is a radical act in itself, one that can have meaningful consequences, like an artist or developer making the jump from hobby to profession.[2]

This chapter will explore the duality of these positions, considering how a site that was so amenable to controversial games in the name of free speech could at the same time be a well-respected bastion of development.

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[2] Javy Gwaltney, "Kick Out The Blams: A Retrospective on the Games of Newgrounds," *Paste Magazine*, September 21, 2015, https://www.pastemagazine.com/games/kick-out-the-blams-a-retrospective-on-the-games-of.

Literature Review

Part of the task of explaining the precise ecosystem of value in and around Newgrounds is to accurately describe the particular forms of labor that exist in flash gaming generally and Newgrounds specifically. To be sure, the motivations and rewards for each individual creator on the platform varied depending on their position in the community and their reasons for making games in the first place. Newgrounds labor also occupies a specific liminal space—on the one hand being uncompensated and aspirational, and on the other having the potential to make significant money through advertising, sponsorship, and licensing agreements which made it possible to sustain an income on the platform. Something that makes Newgrounds unique among gaming exhibition platforms is its intensely social component. Newgrounds is a social network in the same way as Instagram or TikTok, offering comments, forums, messaging, and other communal practices. In other words, the value produced through labor on Newgrounds is not only in the promise of future jobs in game development, but also in social clout and community-building. There is a give and take between developers feeling beholden to an audience and relying on that audience for feedback, support, and validation. Success on the platform, therefore, requires cultural competencies and complementary affective registers that mark the user as a member of the community and therefore worthy of its time and energy.

One great framework for thinking through Newgrounds labor is the work that Kuehn and Corrigan have done on "hope labor." They define hope labor as "un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow."[3] Using SB Nation and Yelp as examples, the authors argue that

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[3] Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas F. Corrigan, "Hope Labor: The Role of Employment Prospects in Online Social Production," *The Political Economy of Communication* 1, no. 1 (2013): 9–25, 10.

laborers who engage in social production for no or low compensation are doing so primarily as a form of self-actualization skill-building and secondarily as a form of job-seeking. At the same time, Kuehn and Corrigan stress that although hope labor claims to be a meritocratic system that enables individuals to build the skills and exposure necessary to progress in the creative industries, it more often than not ends up being exploited by the websites and social media companies that rely on it to keep labor costs to a minimum. Labor on Newgrounds certainly overlaps with hope labor in the sense that flash game developers very often are using a free platform as a way to demonstrate their skillset in a particular field. But I think they differ in two important ways. First, the goal of posting to an online game portal is often not to get a job in the games industry per se, but to gain insight on the creation process and feedback on the game itself. Another important distinction is that frequently these developers are making much more than trivial amounts of money on these games through advertising cuts and licensing deals or, often, by generating the audience and platform to create and publish their own games as a full-time career. I would also distinguish it from labor hermeneutics that more closely track the future-centric ambitions of laborers who are already working in technology or the creative industries, like Gina Neff's *Venture Labor* or Nancy Baym's *Playing to the Crowd,* though these works also inform my understanding of Newgrounds.[4] In those cases, however, the laborer is not developing their skills independently but is more or less already permanently employed and tied to the success of their business. Newgrounds developers, on the other hand, are engaging in a specific community of game development and appreciation that at times looks more like a communal apprenticeship.

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[4] Gina Neff, *Venture Labor: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries*, Acting with Technology (Cambridge, Mass. London: MIT Press, 2012); Nancy K. Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

Brooke Erin Duffy's "aspirational labor" provides another anchor for understanding this particular intersection of creative labor and social media. In *Not Getting Paid to Do What You Love*, she identifies a particular kind of work that centers on the largely uncompensated activities of influencers who post on social media and make brand deals. Aspirational labor, as she describes it, is "a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love. As both a practice and a worker ideology, aspirational labor shifts content creators' focus from the present to the future, dangling the prospect of a career where labor and leisure coexist. Indeed, aspirational laborers expect that they will one day be compensated for their productivity—be it through material rewards or social capital."[5] She identifies three contradictory ethics that define this labor: the contradictions between authenticity and self-promotion, creativity and commerce, and hobby and professional status. Aspirational labor is a great framework and stepping stone for understanding Newgrounds, but there are some distinctions that I would like to make. In particular, I am interested in contrasting Duffy's conception of aspirational labor as a particularly feminine mode of work with the aspirational labor done on early aughts flash gaming sites which were rendered as decidedly masculine. Duffy identifies aspirational labor as having a history in the largely uncompensated "women's work" of domestic labor, care labor, and reproductive labor, as well as having dimensions of "community, affect, and commodity-based self-expression"[6] that have characterized discourses around women's work in the past. Labor on Newgrounds challenges these connections by recontextualizing content-driven social labor within the history of masculinity and technology. Moreover, this labor is much less concerned with the neoliberal and

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[5] Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 2017), 4.

[6] Ibid., 9.

individualistic notions of success and more interested in community, cooperation, and mutual success, even as the kinds of people who have access to those communities is often limited through social dichotomies.

Meritocracy, Gaming, and Internet Culture

Part of what is developing, then, for Newgrounds developers, is not only game development skills but also social skills that determine a person's status within the community. What makes the game dev community unique is that it is predicated on an ideology of meritocracy precisely because video games are seen as meritocratic. Gaming culture is produced through the creation of its own hierarchal structures and those already present in society generally. Broadly speaking, Christopher A. Paul has castigated video game culture as a "toxic meritocracy" where neoliberal ideas of value and ability hide the deep racism and sexism that pervades society generally and gaming culture specifically.[7] The tendency toward neoliberal conceptions of hard work and skill can make it difficult to create networks of shared identity in gaming culture. I do not believe that the rhetorics surrounding spaces like Newgrounds are as amenable to the individualistic ideologies of neoliberalism. It is, however, clearly framed as a meritocracy where the best games rise to the top and the worst ones are voted down by the community. It becomes clear that the metrics by which a game is judged to have merit are not universal, though, and have One regulating meritocratic component of game culture generally is geek masculinity, in which "the valorization of highly refined skill and mastery operates through technology, science, and gaming. Intensive commitment and passion for a domain is a consistent

[7] T. L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2012), 111.

feature of geekdom, where extensive knowledge of specialized areas …operates socially.”[8] Yet women are not given access to the same assumed technological mastery, even if it is demonstrated. Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett have argued that because gaming as a whole actually rests on an exclusive outgroup where gamers see themselves as simultaneously marginalized from society *and* as an exclusive club, geek masculinity functions as an in-group regulation and policing of gaming identity. Often this occurs in online spaces related to gaming like reddit, Xbox Live, and *Penny Arcade*. The resulting discourse, the authors argue, “allows for extreme and virulent lashing out against those who are perceived as others, most notably women. Such silencing warps the seemingly social spaces of Web 2.0 into tools for the exclusion and perpetuation of a male-dominated gaming social public.” Gamergate is perhaps the most visible example of this phenomenon. It was, in a sense, a challenge to identity politics—a line drawn in the sand by straight, white, male gamers who said, “games belong to us.” But as we now know, the politics of gamergate were not exclusive to it. Gray and Leonard note that gamergate was a visible rupture in the larger resulting culture wars against political correctness and “cancel culture” that we find ourselves in today. They write, “we can understand Gamergate as a movement that focused on white men's anxieties over losing ground in a universe assumed to be homogenous."[9] So, reading games cultures more closely can attune scholars to the ways in which discourses of race, gender, and sexuality are operating more broadly.

The creation of social hierarchies in online spaces vis-à-vis demonstrations of technological knowledge as a form of masculinity is not unique to gaming, however. In her study

[8] Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, “Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 3 (July 2012): 401–16, 402.

[9] Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard, eds., *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 11.

of masculinity on the Multi-user Dungeon BlueSky, Lori Kendall described a similar relationship to masculinity in 1995 that Paul and Taylor describe in the 2010s. Specifically, she notes that the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and the masculinity most prominently demonstrated in online spaces like BlueSky is that the BlueSky masculinity is more conscientiously nerdy and seems to revel in its outsider status to hegemonic masculinity while still placing itself hierarchically over women and queer people. She argues that the hierarchies on BlueSky are associated with proximity to and knowledge of technology, especially computers.[10] At the same time, this proximity is treated with ambivalence and derision from society at-large but also within the community itself, where users recognize their secondary status. She writes

> Not surprisingly, given the nerd's contradictory masculinity, BlueSky participants both support and call into question societal norms regarding masculinity. Their conversations about women, men, and sex are often wry and self-deprecatory…In such joking conversations, the irony derives from the men's knowledge that they do not meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity and also indicates some degree of rejection of those standards. However, this self-referential irony encompasses only the relationship between these men and other (presumably more hegemonic) men. It does not include women, who become adjunctive definers of status.[11]

I would argue that, even ten years later, the relationship between geek and hegemonic masculinity did not necessarily fit the *Revenge of the Nerds*-style "us versus them" dichotomy described by Kendall and contemporaries like anthropologist Sherry Turkle.[12] Nevertheless, it is true that the forms of masculinity demonstrated in online spaces were specifically different from and cognizant of their relationship to hegemonic masculinity.

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[10] Lori Kendall, *Hanging out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 73.

[11] Ibid., 82.

[12] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

The early aughts internet in general, and Newgrounds in particular, are characterized in large part by the purposefully aggravating and offensive trolling practices. The definition of trolling is up for significant debate within the academic literature. Some authors describe it as simply falling outside of acceptable bounds of behavior in online spaces.[13] Others take an even wider net, identifying trolling as a huge variety of any kind of anti-social behavior online that is meant to cause harm.[14] Other authors like Claire Hardaker define a troll as a "user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement."[15] My understanding of trolling will lie somewhere in the middle. For my purposes, trolling is not so much an action as it is a sensibility or an affect. I would disagree with Hardaker in the sense that it is only an antagonistic behavior if you are a member of the group that is being antagonized. Instead, trolling can be a method of group cohesion and coalition-building which signals to fellow trolls at the expense of people who are not in on the joke. Trolling, in its most basic definition, is the act of making inflammatory statements, art, or content online in order to make other internet users upset. By upsetting non-trolls, the user can then signal to other trolls that they are "in on the joke." Trolling is a complex social phenomenon of encoding and decoding. In the past I have

[13] Justin Cheng et al., "Anyone Can Become a Troll: Causes of Trolling Behavior in Online Discussions," in *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing* (CSCW '17: Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, Portland Oregon USA: ACM, 2017), 1217–30, https://doi.org/10.1145/2998181.2998213, 1217.

[14] Jonathan Bishop, "Dealing with Internet Trolling in Political Online Communities: Towards the This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things Scale," *International Journal of E-Politics* 5, no. 4 (October 1, 2014): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.4018/ijep.2014100101, 2.

[15] Claire Hardaker, "Trolling in Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication: From User Discussions to Academic Definitions," *Journal of Politeness Research. Language, Behaviour, Culture* 6, no. 2 (January 2010), https://doi.org/10.1515/jplr.2010.011, 237.

sought to complicate the idea proposed by authors like Megan Condis that gaming and troll culture rely on homophobia as a way of demarcating heterosexuality and creating an in-group and out-group in online spaces. Specifically, I found on Twitch and YouTube in the 2020s that often the opposite happened, and it was instead a kind of homosocial faux-intimacy between men that paradoxically reinforced their heterosexuality.[16] In the case of Newgrounds and the early aughts internet, however, I think that the gaming landscape is much closer to the bleak story told by authors like Condis, Salter, and Blodgett about the relationship between online spaces and masculinity. As Megan Condis writes in *Gaming Masculinity*, the performance heightened, offensive rhetoric, misogyny, racism, and homophobia is a marker of geek masculinity through its relationship to troll culture and its signification of being within online gaming culture.[17] So, we should understand the sensibility of trolling as a kind of boundary-marking practice that is not equally afforded to every kind of user but instead is actively afforded to some at the expense of others.

Whitney Phillips describes the process that this kind of affect is meant to avoid in *This is Why We Can't have Nice Things.* She writes that "trolls take active, gleeful measures against…anything emotive, anything less than perfectly rational; they see strong negative emotions like sadness, frustration, or…as flashing neon target signs…They poke and prod their targets until they draw metaphorical blood then point to this blood as proof of the troll's inherent superiority, and the target's inherent weakness."[18] In other words, the act of trolling requires a

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[16] Tom Welch, "'Love You, Bro': Performing Homosocial Intimacies on Twitch:," *Television & New Media* 23, no. 5 (July 2022): 521–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764221081460.

[17] Megan Condis, *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture*, Fandom & Cuture (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).

[18] Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

kind of ironic detachment from the content and form of the trolling itself. Sianne Ngai argues that the kinds of subdued vaguely negative feelings like those that permeate Newgrounds "can be described as conducive to producing ironic distance in a way that the grander and more prestigious passions…do not."[19] Indeed, it is this ironic distance that defines the Newgrounds affect. We might also describe it using Ngai's neologism to describe "the aesthetic experience in which astonishment is paradoxically united with boredom," an affect which she dubs "stuplimity."[20] It is this affective experience in which much of the early aughts internet experience exists and which is a primary factor in the community formation of online gaming spaces like Newgrounds. As Michele Tepper explains:

> When it takes place within a single, closed community, trolling can sometimes be accepted and reinforced…because it serves the dual purpose of enforcing community standards and of increasing community cohesion by providing a game that all those who know the rules can play against those who do not. It works both as a game and as a method of subcultural boundary demarcation because the playing pieces in this game are not plastic markers or toy money but pieces of information.[21]

Nevertheless, though I think the troll aesthetic encapsulates a large part of the Newgrounds experience, it does not necessarily do so for the entirety. While the majority of analysis of trolling requires the existence of a target or a victim, I would like to redefine trolling slightly to include the idea of an imagined victim. In other words, creators on Newgrounds are creating purposefully offensive content not to target any real people per se, but to define themselves against an imagined other that is "too sensitive" to view that kind of content. This fits into

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[19] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, First Harvard University Press paperback (Cambridge, Mass. London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 10.

[20] Ibid., 271.

[21] Michele Tepper, "Usenet Communities and the Cultural Politics of Communication," in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), 39–54.

Newgrounds' larger ethos of free speech, because the community becomes defined in many ways by the freedom to say or post anything, with the understanding that if it were really of concern the users could downvote it.

Methods and Methodologies

This chapter asks a few research questions. What was the impact of Newgrounds on the gaming industry as the first free video game distribution platform on the web? What is it about Newgrounds that made it a successful platform for game distribution? Is this a feature of the platform, the culture, or both? Who was granted access to this platform, both implicitly and explicitly, and what might that mean for the gaming industry? And perhaps most importantly to this dissertation, how does the freeness of Newgrounds contribute to both its success and its pitfalls? To answer these questions, I will analyze a number of interviews from Newgrounds founder Tom Fulp as well as firsthand accounts from prominent creators who published on Newgrounds and articles from the larger game press at the time, most notably *Gamasutra*, which has since rebranded as *Game Developer* and was a primary blog for developers to write post-mortems and discuss the latest trends in gaming. To understand this discourse, I will rely in part on the framework of critical media industry studies as described by Havens, Lotz, and Tinic. They write that "Our intent here is to recuperate the analysis of discourse, in the Foucauldian sense, as the formation of knowledge (and thus power). This entails analyzing how institutions organize ways of knowing into seemingly irrefutable logics of how systems should operate,

thereby bringing to the forefront the material consequences of industrial 'common-sense.'"[22] In the case of this chapter, I will unpack how industrial narratives of Newgrounds as purely revolutionary and communal elide larger effects of the exclusion of minoritized voices within the site specifically and game development generally.

I will also be analyzing the games themselves and, more importantly, the interfaces and pages on which the games are situated. This includes analyzing the comments below the games, the way that they sit in site rankings, various blog posts and announcements from the staff of Newgrounds, and elements of the interface including buttons, menus, advertisements, and categories. In order to analyze these elements properly I will need to access archived versions of the pages on the Internet Archive. Luckily, Flash material has become accessible again through the new Flash emulator Ruffle, which has been implemented both on Newgrounds' website and the Internet Archive. This means that most of the Flash material which had been all but lost in 2020 after the depreciation of Flash is once again accessible. Some of it has been taken off the site or is otherwise not compatible with Ruffle. For those games that are not usable in the interface I will use the Flashpoint Archive. This kind of dual-pronged approach allows me to play the games in the context that they originally would have been played while at the same time having a fail-safe if games have since been taken down or are incompatible with the new emulators.

In order to understand the effects of the Newgrounds audience on the contours of the site itself, I will utilize Mel Stanfill's discursive interface analysis, which is "an analytic method examining website interfaces – functionalities, menu options, and page layouts – for the

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[22] Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (June 2009): 234–53, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2009.01037.x.

structures at work within them,"[23] notably those structures and discourses which reinforce or dismantle structures of power. This methodology invites researchers to consider the ways in which web interfaces, menus, and lists produce embedded assumptions that define normativity in a specific discursive environment. Such a methodology relies on theories of affordance from authors like Gibson, Norman, and Hartson who argue that specific design elements often implicitly or explicitly creates a normalized set of practices which can be read discursively. Hartson categorizes these affordances as physical, functional, cognitive, and sensory. Discursive interface analysis asks the researcher to explore these affordances in the context of the production of norms and power. In service of this methodology, I will be analyzing archived versions of Newgrounds pages from various points in its history.

Adrienne Shaw invites us to consider affordances in the context of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding. For Shaw, new media studies must adopt cultural studies approaches to analyze the larger power structures behind web and video game affordances. She argues that previous approaches to new media and technology studies frame themselves against an un-nuanced strawman of technological determinism without themselves thinking about the way that technology does itself contain assumptions and affordances which help to shape culture but is also always already a part of the culture it produces. Encoding and decoding affordances, she argues, involves a step further removed from Hall's model:

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[23] Mel Stanfill, "The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 7 (August 2015): 1059–74, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814520873.

> We need to find a way to understand the power differentials involved in how interactive media technologies are created and used while acknowledging the fact that the distinction between the production process and the act of reception in encoding/decoding does not adequately capture the interactivity of new media texts…[in] understanding their reception…[we]must interrogate what actions these texts invite and how players actually use them.[24]

For Shaw, interface analysis involves not only the understanding of the underlying affordances placed onto interactive media, but to what extent those affordances are utilized by the audience for those media. In this chapter, I ask how the affordances and assumptions put into place in Newgrounds are taken up by the gaming public, and how those affordances are exploited by a specific group.

Game Development Labor on Newgrounds.com

A Brief History of Adobe Flash and Newgrounds

Flash began as FutureSplash, created by FutureWave Software in 1995. Pitched as a competitor to Adobe Director, it was used to make animations and user interfaces for the web. Almost immediately upon its release, it was adopted by companies like Microsoft (to make the MSN 2.0 platform), Disney (Disney Online), and FOX (The Simpsons website).[25] FutureWave was then acquired by Macromedia in 1996, which rebranded FutureSplash into the portmanteau Flash. This acquisition also brought Flash Player, which became the predominant method to view Flash files, which had the extension .swf. Because of its light weight and ease in implementation

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[24] Adrienne Shaw, "Encoding and Decoding Affordances: Stuart Hall and Interactive Media Technologies," *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (May 2017): 592–602, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717692741.

[25] Jim Boulton, "Macromedia Flash Back," *Digital Archaeology* (blog), 2012, http://digital-archaeology.org/flash-back/.

with a simple browser plugin, Flash quickly became the dominant web media platform in the 2000s. The proliferation of Flash as a platform changed the face web, especially in making it easier for users to create complicated animations and interface elements that wouldn't have been possible before. As Megan Ankerson points out, "the rise of Flash during the euphoria period represents a transformative moment of web practice in which presumptions of the meaning of the web and how it ought to look and work were in flux."[26] In fact, the Flash platform not only democratized the development of game and animation but also became a foundational platform upon which many websites were based entirely. It wasn't until the popularization of HTML5 as the new standard for web development that many of the features of flash—specifically embedding video and gaming content directly onto the page—could be replicated in-browser without the use of plugins. This gave a lot of control in shaping the feel of the web to audiences who were comfortable using Flash to make content.

Beginning with the release of Flash 3 in 1998 and Flash 4 in 1999, users could use simple commands to change the order of animations and play specific animations on cue using Flash. This allowed the development of adventure-style games where the user could essentially play through a movie. The most important development for Flash as it relates to game development on Newgrounds was the implementation of ActionScript with the release of Flash 5 in September 2000. Though Flash could be used to make rudimentary point-and-click style games as early as Flash 3, ActionScript was a fully functional object-oriented programming language similar to JavaScript. This release meant that Flash could be used to make much more complicated games which could still be displayed in-browser the same way as an animation or interface could.

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[26] Megan Sapnar Ankerson, *Dot-Com Design: The Rise of a Usable, Social, Commercial Web*, Critical Cultural Communication (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 124.

Though seen primarily as a synecdoche of the Flash games movement, the beginnings of Newgrounds actually predate Flash. The first use of the term was in a Neo Geo fanzine called *New Ground*, created by Newgrounds founder Tom Fulp in 1991 when he was 13 years old. Four years later, he would turn the idea into a site called New Ground Remix where he could upload his own projects. Newgrounds became known for its distasteful and often violent games. As Fulp remembered it, "Things that were like super edgy and violent. And things that you couldn't play on your home video game console, or see on TV.'[27] He released two popular games that garnered attention for the site: *Club a Seal*, where the player could beat a baby seal, and *The Asssassin,* where, as described by Fulp, "you assassinate annoying celebrities…it was the sort of the same thing, where you seen them, and you click on them, and you shoot them, or make their head explode or whatever."[28] Later, Fulp would go on to release *Pico's School*, a game about a school shooting that was released after the Columbine High School shooting in 1999. As Salter and Murray explain, *Pico's School* was seen as a revolution in the way that it utilized the relatively limited interactive affordances of Flash 3 to create a point and click adventure game.[29] At the same time, Fulp got a lot of criticism for *Pico's School* and would eventually say that he regretted releasing the game. Even so, Pico would become something of a mascot for Newgrounds, and the game would retain an almost mythical status amongst the community there. The release of games like *Club a Seal*, *The Assassin*, and *Pico's School* by the founder of the site itself would ultimately set the tone for the website that would follow. It is no surprise that

[27] Alex Goldman and PJ Vogt, "#105 At World's End, Podcast," *Reply All,* Podcast (New York: Gimlet Media, 2017), https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/j4hlx6/105-at-worlds-end.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Anastasia Salter and John Murray, *Flash: Building the Interactive Web*, Platform Studies (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014).

games like *Spear Britney* would becomes so popular when the "kill a celebrity" genre of game was present from the beginning.

Until the year 2000, Newgrounds was personally curated by Fulp. He chose which games and animations would end up on the site, and he coded individual HTML pages for each entry. That changed when he left his university to work on Newgrounds full time. The Newgrounds team created the Portal, which allowed users to automatically upload games Fulp wrote in his history of the site that "the automated Portal was our dream. Its launch would forever change the face of Newgrounds… [it] opened the floor to much better artists than myself. Newgrounds was the first Flash showcase site of this type, which is what really helped establish it as THE place to show off your work."[30] This flooded the site with new content and it struggled to meet the demand for server space, especially without compromising the graphic nature of the site in exchange for support from advertisers during the tumultuous internet bubble of the early 2000s. Newgrounds was supported by the independent film production company Troma Entertainment until 2003 when it was released and went fully independent. This allowed Newgrounds to take full control of ad revenue and become profitable. The Portal would become the keystone aspect of the Newgrounds experience, especially with the addition of Portals for audio and art. These portals had the advantage of connecting musicians and visual artists with programmers to facilitate the creation of new games while keeping the labor within the community.

19 years after the release of *Alien Hominid* on Newgrounds, Tom Fulp would be honored with the Pioneer Award at the 2021 Game Developers Choice Awards, part of the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco—the same gathering that hosts the IGF—which acts as

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[30] Tom Fulp, "Newgrounds Wiki - History," Newgrounds.com, 2023, https://www.newgrounds.com/wiki/about-newgrounds/history.

one of the larger industry-run awards events honoring Video Games. The Pioneer Award is meant to honor "breakthrough business, tech and game design milestones"[31] and has been awarded to such game development innovators as Sierra On-line co-founder Roberta Williams, *Minecraft* creator Markus Persson and *Tetris* creator Alexey Pajitnov as well as the founders of studios like Activision, Riot Games, and Valve. In a press statement, the conference described Fulp as a "trailblazer of the Macromedia Flash games that helped define a generation of indie developers" and later wrote that they were recognizing Fulp "for, among other achievements, creating the hugely popular website Newgrounds, as well as Newgrounds Portal, the first system to allow instant publishing of games and movies to a website. The advent of Newgrounds brought about an explosion of creations and gave a platform for independent developers' Flash games."[32] It is clear from the award and from the description of Fulp's work that Newgrounds has had a lasting impact on the gaming industry, at least as far as the industry itself is concerned.

This rhetoric, while perhaps heightened, is generally true; Newgrounds was a platform that quickly enabled an entirely new kind of development that didn't require any kind of publisher or contract. It was revolutionary in enabling easy and fast game publication online without the need to pay for hosting or garner the approval of administrators of sites that were more curated. The games were free to create and free to distribute, and they were also free to play. *Nintendo Life* explained that "If you've been around for Flash games since the beginning, you've probably seen many of them graduate from browser games to full-fledged console

[31] Staff, "Tom Fulp and Laralyn McWilliams to Be Honored at 2021 Game Developers Choice Awards," Game Developers Conference (GDC), July 1, 2021, https://gdconf.com/news/tom-fulp-and-laralyn-mcwilliams-be-honored-2021-game-developers-choice-awards.

[32] Ibid.

games…Newgrounds was the breeding ground for the indie game scene we have today."[33] One only need to see a list of some of Newgrounds' alumni to understand the impact that it has had. Several highly successful independent games that have roots in Newgrounds include *Super Meat Boy*, *Hollow Knight*, *Among Us* and *Cult of the Lamb* among many others. Many successful animators, musicians, and artists also got their start on Newgrounds.

The story told by the gaming industry is that websites like Newgrounds inspired a whole generation of game developers and provided space for developing their skills. Of course, the reality of Newgrounds is more complicated than that industry lore. While posting games to Newgrounds was free, the games could be taken offline not for content reasons but because users didn't like them. The use of a voting algorithm would mean that the best games would rise to the top and the worst games would be "blammed," or made unviewable on the website. All throughout its lifespan, Newgrounds has housed content that would make many people very uncomfortable. Beginning almost as soon as Newgrounds began automatically accepting submissions in 2000, it became host to racist, sexist, violent, and pornographic games. The most popular game on Newgrounds in 2000 was called, simply, *Spear Britney* and was a game where you could stab Britney Spears with a spear. Other popular games that year included *Torture Bill Gates, Kill Eminem, Kill Britney Spears, Kiss Britney Spears,* and *Shit on the Power Puff Girls*. *Alien Hominid*, despite its success, is far from the most popular or successful game on Newgrounds. Until the inexplicable rise of the rhythm game *Friday Night Funkin'* in 2020, that spot was held by the 2002 pornographic dating simulator *SimGirls*. In fact, many of the most popular games are porn. These games weren't separated from the non-adult games in the

[33] Kate Gray, "Soapbox: The Founder Of Newgrounds Will Receive An Award At GDC - Here's Why That Matters," *Nintendo Life*, July 2, 2021, https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/07/soapbox_the_founder_of_newgrounds_will_receive_an_award_at_gdc_-_heres_why_that_matters.

Newgrounds feed until around 2005. One of the most popular series on Newgrounds is the *Meet'N'Fuck* Series, which includes such titles as *Meet'N'Fuck: Ocean Cruise, Meet'N'Fuck: Detective RPG,* and *Meet'N'Fuck: Street Racer*. Moreover, Newgrounds had an earned reputation for hosting material that was deeply racist. As Cassandra Van Buren writes, the site was home to dozens of anti-Arab animations in the wake of September 11th and the war on terror. She argues that sites like Newgrounds were able to host the kinds of racist caricatures and over-the-top violence that was rampant in the United States at the time but would not be shown in mainstream media.[34] Needless to say, these games are not usually mentioned in conversations about how productive and revolutionary Newgrounds is. But this is the reality of the kind of content that not only permeated the site but was also routinely rewarded and celebrated.

At this point I will note that Newgrounds operated for years before video games were granted first amendment protection in the United States, which didn't occur until the Supreme Court's landmark decision *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* in 2011. So Fulp was taking on a lot of risk with his decision to steadfastly support whatever games were submitted to Newgrounds. Because of the site's "unwillingness to capitulate and censor obscene content," many advertisers blacklisted Newgrounds which often made it a money-losing endeavor. [35] This did little to change the site's policy, though. The site hosted the game *Kaboom!* in 2002, a game about a suicide bomber where the goal is to kill as many people as possible in an explosion (heavily implied to be a Palestinian attack on Israel). The game drew the concern of Democratic

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[34] Cassandra Van Buren, "Critical Analysis of Racist Post-9/11 Web Animations," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 50, no. 3 (2006): 537–54.

[35] Jared Lee, "How Newgrounds Changed the Game," *SUPERJUMP* (blog), July 8, 2017, https://medium.com/super-jump/how-newgrounds-changed-the-game-4346521a32ab.

congresswoman Nita Lowey, who requested that the game be removed. Newgrounds refused. Webmaster Wade Fulp—who also happens to be Tom's brother—declined Lowey's request, saying "As long as it's not illegal, we don't take the stuff down. We're just trying to protect [the author's] free speech." It was clear that, in spite of protests and governmental backlash, Newgrounds remained committed to free speech on their platform.

That said, the official rules for Newgrounds submissions have historically put some limitations on the kinds of games that could be released, though most offending submissions find their way around the guidelines and in practice Newgrounds has been very reticent to take games down, doing so rarely. In 2000, when the portal first opened, users were told games could not be "racist, excessively pornographic, personally threatening, or offensive beyond normal newgrounds fare."[36] The guidelines were already relying on the community members' own internal guidelines for what was and was not acceptable, meaning that they would simply reinforce the level of offensive material that had already been established. Later, in 2004, the guidelines became "excessively pornographic or illegal…racist or downright hateful towards specific groups of people."[37] These submission guidelines did not seem to stop racist submissions from making it through, though. Because the site relied on its own members to report any racist or hateful content, it often remained on the site. By 2024, the site added homophobia to a list of banned content.[38] Misogyny, sexism, and violence have never been banned on Newgrounds,

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[36] Newgrounds, "Newgrounds Portal," Newgrounds, May 11, 2000, https://web.archive.org/web/20000511044208/http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/index.php3.

[37] Newgrounds, "Submit Your Flash Movie to Newgrounds!," Newgrounds, June 16, 2004, https://web.archive.org/web/20040616221617/http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/submit.php.

[38] Newgrounds, "Newgrounds Wiki - Content Submission," Newgrounds, 2024, https://www.newgrounds.com/wiki/help-information/content-submission.

though. There have been rare instances in the site's history, however, where they have taken down content that did not explicitly violate one of their guidelines. One example is when the site removed a 2013 Flash game that re-enacted the Sandy Hook shooting, despite Fulp having previously released his own game about a shooting, *Pico's School.*[39] This decision led to some backlash against Fulp from the community, as well as cries of censorship. Other users defended Fulp. Since then, Newgrounds has added a clause to their submission guidelines which reads "If you are directly making light of / exploiting a tragedy, we may or may not choose to stand by your freedom of expression. You may have to take it somewhere else. We've defended most stuff in the past but nothing is absolute."[40]

The interactions, experiences, goals, and motivations of Newgrounds users do not necessarily fit into one box. They vary from individual to individual, but also among individuals, who simultaneously see the site as an artistic venture but also an entertainment venue for base predilections. Newgrounds released and rewarded trans manifestos like *Dys4ia* as well as misogynist shovelware like *Spear Britney.* It praised novelty and constructive feedback, leading to the creation of entirely new genres of games like escape rooms and endless runners and also demanded 21 entries in the *Meet'N'Fuck* series. It almost feels like there are a multiplicity of audiences competing for attention on Newgrounds. But I want to reject the idea that the audiences for art games like *The Company of Myself* are completely separate from the ones for porn games like *Cooties Bar X-Ray Glasses* (the fifth-most popular game of all time on Newgrounds). One useful frame for considering sites like Newgrounds is Philips and Milner's

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[39] Tori Floyd, "'Slaying of Sandy Hook Elementary' Game Reenacts Fatal Shootings, Stirs Fury Online," Yahoo News, November 20, 2013, http://ca.news.yahoo.com/blogs/right-click/slaying-sandy-hook-elementary-game-reenacts-fatal-shootings-203637875.html.

[40] Newgrounds, "Newgrounds Wiki - Content Submission," 2024.

"ambivalent internet." They describe many examples of online participation that are "simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed" and "too unwieldy, too variable across specific cases, to be essentialized as this as opposed to that… they inhabit, instead, a full spectrum of purposes – all depending on who is participating, who is observing, and what set of assumptions each person brings to a given interaction."[41] It is also this kind of ambivalence that I would like to articulate with the idea of free Flash game labor on platforms like Newgrounds. Such labor is simultaneously unpaid and lucrative, communal and distancing, pointless and rewarding.

Flash Game Labor

The focus of this chapter is a particular kind of game development labor which emerged from the ability to release games for free online. This labor is a kind of uncompensated, speculative, and ambitious labor that characterizes much of the labor of game creation that predated Newgrounds and continues into the present day on platforms like Steam and Itch.io. It involves a stage of game labor where game development is done not solely for personal enjoyment nor as a full-time career or in a contract capacity. Instead, it is a developmental informed by discourses of improvement, growth, and practice, while still leaving space for possible success and profit. I use developmental in two capacities here. The first obviously refers to game development. The second, and more important meaning is the development of the skills of the laborer and also the development of the creative community in which the laborer exists. We might understand labor on Newgrounds as a kind of apprenticeship, although instead of learning under an individual mentor the developer learns with the community. In this way,

[41] Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 10.

Newgrounds acts akin to a modern incubator, facilitating the success of nascent developers in the same way that y-combinator facilitated the success of startups. But rather than individual angel investors who are shaping the companies, the game developers are being shaped by community forums, comments, and collaborations with other members of the flash game development space.

Unlike other kinds of future-oriented but unpaid labor, this labor is neither particularly exploited nor alienated. In fact, the financial and social rewards for making online games can be great and immediate. The ad sharing programs of websites like Newgrounds, Kongregate, and Armor Games gave plenty of people enough income to survive through making and releasing games for free. At its best, it allowed developers to make the kinds of art that they enjoyed while surviving or even thriving. It also allowed them to participate in spaces where their art could be constructively critiqued and judged, which would let them mature as artists and developers. We need only consider the enormous list of game developers who started on platforms like Newgrounds but whose work soon found immense success on paid platforms like Xbox Live arcade, the PlayStation Store, the Nintendo e-Shop, and Steam.

The promise of Newgrounds, stated in its slogan "Everything, by Everyone." is a kind of utopian guarantee that the greatest games that are submitted to the site would be nurtured and loved by the community, and that the detritus would fall to the floor below. The idea is that the meritocratic nature of users being able to vote for the best games and also comment on them would not only give developers feedback for future projects in terms of what is popular and what is successful, but also that only great games would make it to the front page and therefore make Newgrounds the best place to play flash games and watch videos. In some ways this promise came true. But, like the idea of a meritocracy generally, the identities and sensibilities of the creators and the voting public had significant impact on what kinds of games could become

successful on Newgrounds and who could not. As Adrienne Massanari has discussed in relation to Reddit—another website which promises a utopian and unbiased experience of the internet through the promotion of news and links which are popular with the community—the use of social voting algorithms allows the views of the most prominent users to dominate.[42] In the case of Reddit, this meant promoting content that was explicitly misogynistic and alienating the women in the audience. As I will demonstrate with Newgrounds, these kinds of experiences also permeated online Flash platforms. Only users who already knew how to navigate the troll-centric spaces of the early-aughts internet and who fit in to the often acrimonious and in-group dominated platform of Newgrounds were able to be successful in its meritocracy.

The story of Newgrounds is a story of ambivalence and nuance. I don't think it can be overstated how influential the platform was on the independent game development scene at the time. How revolutionary it was that users could instantaneously upload games for feedback, refine their skills, make money, and become successful game developers in their own right. At the same time, it was a space that not only housed deeply misogynistic, racist, and homophobic games but also encouraged those games and pushed them to the front page. The pervasive industry lore of Newgrounds is that it created a brand-new generation of game developers and that it changed the industry forever, which is largely true. But that industry lore also elides the fact that only certain game developers were comfortable on Newgrounds and that only certain game aesthetics were welcome. This kind of faux-meritocracy would indeed have a massive impact on the independent gaming community, though it would make accessing it difficult for developers who didn't fit in with the core sensibilities of Newgrounds. It is my goal with this

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[42] Adrienne Massanari, "#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 3 (March 2017): 329–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815608807.

chapter to understand this tension—both explaining the unique utility and of novelty of platforms like Newgrounds while also acknowledging the cost of its meritocratic system.

Flash, Newgrounds and Game Labor Communities

The language surrounding both Flash and Newgrounds among developers and members of the gaming industry could often reach almost utopian levels. Their rhetoric could often be separated into three basic sentiments. The first is that Newgrounds is an ideal platform to release a game because of its democratic process and the idea that great games will be rewarded. The second is that, at its core, Newgrounds is an accessible and welcoming community that teaches people how to make games and supports good game making. The overarching sentiment is that the value of the labor being put into developing games is both to learn from the audience comments and other developers and build the skills necessary for better game making, as well as the social component of being part of the Newgrounds community.

Accessibility was huge for a burgeoning development scene. Jared Lee of *SUPERJUMP* looked back on his era on Newgrounds with pure reverence. He wrote:

> It showed me that one person could make a cartoon and share it with the world. One person could create a game and host it on the internet. Nothing but perseverance stood in the way of making this stuff. There were no gatekeepers… *Newgrounds'* list of success stories is staggering. YouTube channels like *Game Grumps*, *FilmCow*, or *Hot Diggedy Demon;* games like *Super Meat Boy*, *Castle Crashers*, *Snipperclips*, or *Binding of Isaac;* and numerous cartoons on Adult Swim wouldn't exist without *Newgrounds*… It's hard to imagine where the indie game scene would be without the role *Newgrounds* played in giving thousands a platform to share their work and find inspiration.[43]

Lee continues, writing that this inspired him to get into game making and animation. "In my time on *Newgrounds*, I made over 30 cartoons, three games, and participated in a number of

[43] Lee, "How Newgrounds Changed the Game."

collaborations," he wrote, "*Newgrounds* gave its community an opportunity they never would have had before. And they took it."[44] The deference that creators like Lee have toward Newgrounds show that, for many of them, it was a community where they felt that they had artistic freedom and were encouraged to create. Lee describes a learning opportunity where he could grow among peers, gain experience, and collaborate. I think his estimation of the impact of Newgrounds on the indie dev scene was also correct. It's also not a coincidence that all of the creators he mentioned were white men. But the openness of Newgrounds as a platform and the affordances given to its users to rate games imply that it is purely meritocratic.

Several creators saw Newgrounds as a completely unbiased system. The way that voting for games on Newgrounds works is that users can give a rating of between zero and five, with any game that is rated less than one automatically "blammed," or removed from the site except for the reviews (as a kind of obituary).[45] Game developer Philip Maxey wrote for *Gamasutra* that flash portals were the golden age of video game discovery online, especially compared to the app store and steam.

> Putting your game on a high traffic site got you a lot of views and Newgrounds especially worked on a completely fair and democratic system, which meant your game was guaranteed views for a limited amount of time and more if lots of people liked your game. Your game would be visible on one of the main pages of the website for a limited amount of time, getting you a lot of exposure regardless of the quality of your game, i.e. it gave everyone a chance.[46]

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[44] Ibid.

[45] John C. Paolillo, Jonathan Warren, and Breanne Kunz, "Social Network and Genre Emergence in Amateur Flash Multimedia," in *Proceedings of the 40th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 2007.

[46] Philip Maxey, "The Golden Age of Game Discovery," *Game Developer*, December 7, 2015, https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/the-golden-age-of-game-discovery.

This statement implies a purely meritocratic system where the best games would rise to the top and the worst games would no longer get attention after being added. In a kind of wisdom of the crowd mentality, many creators defended Newgrounds' system as inherently democratic. Maxey continued by writing that "that there were hardly any review sites for Flash games because they weren't needed. The games sites themselves acted as filters of quality, with the higher quality games getting the most plays and being featured by the sites themselves.[47] So the narrative being spun about Newgrounds is not only that it is democratic but also that it is self-critical. It forgoes the need for outside critics because the audience is enough to determine whether a game is good or not.

In my investigation of Newgrounds, the commenters who reviewed the games actually took their job quite seriously for the most part. Many of the reviews would be specific things that they thought the game could do to improve, and reviews often had a more helpful tone. It does seem as though the community aspect of Newgrounds was genuinely aimed at helping developers. *Fancy Pants Adventure* creator Brad Borne said that "games would be rated on by real people, and that was part of the game too…It felt like your vote mattered, that you brought a game up to the light, you got it through the portal. It was real people that were doing that."[48] In a way, it was ingrained in the ethos of the site that the democratic element of Newgrounds was foundational to its success, a sentiment shared by the staff of the site as well as its audience and its creators.

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Amelia Hansford, "The End of Flash: What Legacy Will It Leave Behind?," GamesIndustry.biz, January 11, 2021, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/the-end-of-flash-what-legacy-will-it-leave-behind.

Of course, this ideal of the democratic aspect of Newgrounds worked only insofar as every submission is actually given equal consideration and that the criteria by which games are being judged is solely limited to quality. Past studies of user-based voting on social platforms would indicate that this is not the case, however. Adrienne Massanari has said that the upvoting system on Reddit feels democratic but only goes on to reinforce the biases of the community members that make up the bulk of reddit users: straight white men.[49] We know from studies of user data on Newgrounds that the same phenomena happens there. Firstly, the vast majority of Newgrounds users are male between the ages of 14 and 22. As of 2011, male-identified profiles outnumbered female-identified profiles by a factor of 7.[50] Because user gender is posted by default on profiles, it is easy to see what gender every creator is at the very least claiming to be. That makes discrimination on the basis of gender in reviewing games pretty easy. Findings from Warren et al. in 2011 show that female users received consistently lower scores on their submissions than male users.[51] The reasons for the lower scores could be purposeful discrimination on the part of users, the fact that female users may have submitted content that didn't resonate with the vastly male userbase, or a combination thereof. Whatever the case, women and girls were at a consistent structural disadvantage when it comes to success on Newgrounds. This matters not only for the fairness of the platform per se, but also because Newgrounds consistently elevated and occasionally even sponsored games that were well-rated,

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[49] Massanari, "#GamerGate," 329.

[50] Jonathan Warren, Sharon Stoerger, and Ken Kelley, "Longitudinal Gender and Age Bias in a Prominent Amateur New Media Community," *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1 (February 2012): 7–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811410390, 10.

[51] Ibid, 18.

and female users would be less likely to get access to that kind of exposure and sponsorship that may lead to more lucrative deals in the industry down the line.

I think it's worth noting that it was not an accident that Newgrounds allowed controversial games at the expense of appealing to a broader audience. In fact, Fulp frames it as a deliberate choice in creating a space for people who might not otherwise fit in. In an interview with the podcast Reply All, he explained:

> When people would come to the site, and they'd be edgier than I was… there's always that side of me that's like I don't want to kick them off the site because they're like me... a lot of people do like reach out… some people that don't get dark humor don't realize it can be really therapeutic to other people that are having kind of dark feelings and stuff. Just feeling depressed or down or anxious. And um... So like there'd be people who reach out to me who like really considered it life saving like that this existed for them. They just enjoyed the site so much. They were so miserable in the rest of their life, then they would come to Newgrounds and it would be like their happy place. And you just like, you met a lot of people like that over the years and it makes you feel like this is sort of, like... As crazy as it might look to some people, it is like performing a public good in other ways. So it kind of made me feel... you know, yeah like, I like this stuff and there's other people that like this stuff too, and it's good that they can have a place instead of just feeling like you know outsiders and outcasts all the time.[52]

So Newgrounds was purposefully courting a specific kind of audience through not censoring the games and animations that were being submitted. It's no wonder, then, that it had such a dedicated but niche core audience.

Something that characterized Flash in its early years was the rich developer community which surrounded it and which facilitated its proliferation and the ease with which new programmers were able to learn it. During the tenth anniversary of Flash in 2006, developer Stacey Mulcahy explained her experience with the Flash community, writing:

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[52] Goldman and Vogt, "#105 At World's End."

> Flash has taught me about the importance of resourcefulness and community as a developer. The Flash community is a vibrant and open one, because the members make an effort to give back to the community as much as they have taken from it over the years. Getting help in the Flash community is often just a forum or blog posting away. People are constantly posting experiments or insights that push the boundaries of the technology. It's hard not to be inspired.[53]

Communal development and assistance would become a key component of Flash development. Newgrounds was far from the only Flash game portal online, especially as sites like Kongregate and Armor Games became popular. Nevertheless, Fulp would go on to call Newgrounds "the most vibrant community of Flash artists and programmers."[54] Prominent creators would consistently praise the community found on Newgrounds, claiming that it was the community that was responsible for their future successes in the industry. In fact, the immediacy of the connection between creator and audience was often sold as an important part of the development process and learning what worked in game development. Borne would go on to explain, "with Flash games, you threw something out there and people liked it or didn't like…It's a very pure relationship between the developer and the audience. There's no microtransactions, no ads. It's just, *is the game good?*" *Luckslinger* developer Marciano Viereck would elaborate that not only was the Newgrounds audience useful because it helped them understand what was popular, but also specifically because of their honesty in the process. In a postmortem of the game, he wrote:

> After making a demo version of Luckslinger (which was then called Bullets and Beats) we decided to upload it to Newgrounds because we've always found the players on Newgrounds really honest and brutal with their feedback. So if they would tell us that Bullets and Beats sucked or that our concept was boring then it might mean that our Luck

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[53] Stacey Mulcahy, "Flash: Ten Years, Ten Perspectives," *Flash Tenth Anniversary* (2006), quoted in John Murray and Anastasia Salter *Flash: Building the Interactive Web* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 9.

[54] Brandon Sheffield, "Taunting The Behemoth: Tom Fulp and Dan Paladin Cry Out," *Game Developer*, December 12, 2008, https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/taunting-the-behemoth-tom-fulp-and-dan-paladin-cry-out.

concept isn't as fun or as good as we thought it would be.[55]

The value in releasing a game for free on Newgrounds would be, largely, to take advantage of a free audience that gave valuable feedback. The Travisionist, in a comparison with the then-extant Steam Greenlight program, wrote that "In my mind, these developers would do well to receive feedback and practice through Newgrounds, rather than risk the brutality of the Steam community while trying to sell amateur work for a pro price."[56] The ultimate rhetoric of developers and industry commentators is that Newgrounds is the perfect place for new game creators to develop their skills. Perhaps more importantly, Fulp stresses the accessibility of Flash as a key component of Newgrounds and the democratic nature of the site. In a 2020 interview he said "Flash offered animation and game development tools to people who may otherwise have never had them."[57] The fact that Flash was free and easy to use further situated Newgrounds as a developmental platform where users could quickly and easily churn out games.

Ultimately, this rhetoric only fit for creators who are welcome to the platform. Even a cursory search for the phrase "Newgrounds and women" on Google will show popular threads with titles like "I fucking hate women" and "are girls real." Even a (probably facetious) thread titled "Newgrounds is unfair to women" is full of users whose signature images feature lesbian pornography and naked women and is full of replies like "girls aren't funny enough," "I agree. Women should be able to submit sexy pictures of themselves so they have a chance of getting

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[55] Marciano Viereck, "Luckslinger Postmortem - Our Story," *Game Developer*, February 6, 2017, https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/luckslinger-postmortem---our-story.

[56] thetravisionist, "Editorial: Newgrounds vs. Greenlight," *The Travisionist* (blog), July 28, 2015, https://thetravisionist.wordpress.com/2015/07/28/editorial-newgrounds-vs-greenlight/.

[57] Cecilia D'Anastasio, "The Ragtag Squad That Saved 38,000 Flash Games From Oblivion," *Wired*, February 6, 2020, https://www.wired.com/story/flash-games-digital-preservation-flashpoint/.

featured too," and "Newgrounds is for dudes, Facebook is for chicks."[58] Lori Kendall argues that it is precisely the lack of women on Newgrounds which grounds it as a community of practice and gives rise to the particular contours of its sensibilities.[59] In other words, Newgrounds becomes defined by its exclusion of women, and its embrace of games where the user can beat or strip women go on to reify the sentiment that "Newgrounds is for dudes."

Conclusion

Tom Fulp's creation of Newgrounds and his decision to open the platform to anybody who wants to submit a game changed the video game industry. The freeness of the platform, combined with the free cost to upload and play games, created a unique environment in Newgrounds that stressed community and experimentation in game development. That said, this freedom also came with a cost, one that was disproportionately shouldered by women, LGBTQ folks, and people of color. When considering the history of the video game industry generally and of online games specifically, it is important to ask where developers are cutting their teeth, and how those environments might shape the industry moving forward.

Newgrounds, for its part, continues to host its share of controversies and victories. In 2017, Fulp began asking users to voluntarily subscribe to the site in a Patreon-like model, citing the continued blacklisting of the site from advertisers. In blog post, he wrote:

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[58] Newgrounds, "Newgrounds Is Unfair to Women," Newgrounds.com, June 1, 2014, https://www.newgrounds.com/bbs/topic/1367599.

[59] Lori Kendall, "'Noobs' and 'Chicks' on Animutation Portal: Power and Status in a Community of Practice," *International Journal of Web Based Communities* 4, no. 4 (2008): 491–502.

> I really don't enjoy asking people to do this. It's not like I woke up one day and said, 'Wow, after all I've accomplished, I think I'll spend the rest of my life begging people for money.' … We're getting hammered by declining ad rates and ad blockers. We're blacklisted by Google Ads, which makes us blacklisted by Google-owned DoubleClick and any ad network that ties into Google services. We don't track weird personal details about our users and share it with marketers. We have indecent content but we're one of the last decent websites and we're 100% independent.[60]

Fulp's request ultimately paid off, and users began to offset the costs of hosting Newgrounds. The real boon to the site, however, came in 2021 when the rhythm game *Friday Night Funkin'* began to drive traffic back to the site. According to *PC Gamer*, the first Newgrounds-only update to the game was so popular that it crashed the site, and it quickly became the most popular game of all time.[61] What is worth noting about the game, too, is how the developers released the code for free to encourage collaboration on the site. This release has revived the very community labor style that developed on Newgrounds when the site first started accepting games. It remains to be seen whether this iteration of Newgrounds will experience the same victories and pitfalls as before.

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[60] Lee, "How Newgrounds Changed the Game."

[61] Rachel Watts, "Friday Night Funkin' Is the DDR Beatboxing Game Driving Players Back to Newgrounds," *PC Gamer*, July 15, 2021, https://www.pcgamer.com/friday-night-funkin-is-the-ddr-beatboxing-game-driving-players-back-to-newgrounds/.

Chapter 3: Work is the Play of Childhood: The Audience Commodity and Identity on Neopets

In early 2023, the virtual pet website Neopets was on the verge of collapse. It was purchased by American edutainment company JumpStart in 2014, which was in turn acquired by the Chinese gaming company NetDragon. NetDragon moved to shutter JumpStart in 2023 after a failed push toward Neopets NFTs, which would have resulted in Neopets shutting down. But the site received a lifeline when a consortium of JumpStart and NetDragon employees led by NetDragon employee Dominick Law purchased Neopets in July of 2023 to be spun off as its own independent company called World of Neopets. Crucial to this decision was a general desire by staff to return Neopets to its 00s roots. The new strategy for Neopets would involve appealing to the nostalgia of the millions of players who had once enjoyed the site but have since left it. According to one contemporary account, "Law's team has been on what it calls a 'reactivation campaign' to win back players, appearing at gaming events and enlisting prominent figures like singer John Legend as brand ambassadors to launch 'a new era for Neopets.'"[1] But why do these sites still evoke so much excitement and emotion in the younger millennials and older zoomers who used them? A clear answer is nostalgia, but in particular I think the answer has to do with the particular affective attachments that users of this generation of online virtual worlds have toward their past.

This chapter will continue the work of chapter 2 to discuss continued rise of Flash games and their commercialization, specifically considering the marketing of Flash games to children in the early and mid-aughts. For this chapter, my research questions will be: at what point did

[1] Lim Hui Jie, "Neopets Is under New Management and Planning a Comeback in a Vastly Different Era of Gaming," CNBC, November 3, 2023, https://www.cnbc.com/2023/11/03/neopets-plans-comeback-in-a-vastly-different-era-of-gaming.html.

digital games become a “free lunch” for the commodity audience? What concerns were leveraged? Finally, given that sites like Neopets involve so much free labor on the part of the audience to work, I will be asking why the audience was willing to do so much labor and what kind of value they got in return. By the late 90s, games had become increasingly popular online and digital arcades had the potential to be big business. Brands and conglomerates with existing strategies for targeting children began to use games as a way to lure them into their media ecosystems. This includes three major networks for children and adolescents: Nickelodeon, the Disney Channel, and Cartoon Network. In a 2001 interview, Nickelodeon Online general manager Mike Skagerlind exemplified the corporate thought behind the strategy, which was that games keep kids’ attention. “So when you have a really great gaming experience you find kids really do come back, because they are trying to get mastery,” he said, “that is the key thing in kid gaming — it is about mastering the game.”[2] Conglomerates like Disney, Viacom, and Time-Warner recognized that free online games were a way to keep children engaged within their own media ecosystems. These ecosystems, however, also provided spaces of relative freedom for children to engage with other online users and also to explore and grow their own identities. I will be using Neopets, the children’s gaming and social platform, as a case study. I argue that while spaces like Neopets are certainly exploitative of both the audience commodity and the free labor of user generated content, these same spaces—through their design and community orientation—made room for the exploration of queer and other marginalized identities in which children were often not able to participate in the offline world. As Jackie Marsh has argued, “There is a need to explore the complexities embedded within the relationship between

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[2] Karen Brown, “Nick Looks to Gaming As High-Speed Revenue Play,” Multichannel News, November 12, 2001, https://www.nexttv.com/news/nick-looks-gaming-high-speed-revenue-play-153197.

childhood and the commercial world in order to identify the ways in which children are positioned within markets and to develop strategies for facilitating their critical engagement with this positioning."[3] There is a potential for concern over the intense level of marketing and product placement that children navigate on a site like Neopets, but there is also a potential for users to not only navigate that environment but also thrive within it. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to explain this both/and position, where children's increasing interpellation as economic citizens under capitalist hegemony can also simultaneously build anti-hegemonic frameworks for thinking about their own identities and the identities of those around them, building community, and performing the labor necessary to feel comfortable in their own affective states. In other words, I will identify the ways in which users of sites like Neopets were able to transform their generated *economic value* in the form of the audience commodity and free labor for *affective value* in the form of identity exploration, comfort, community, and fun.

This chapter will be analyzing *Neopets* from the viewpoint of a non-premium user who is engaging with Neopets branded content, whether that be the sponsorships of Disney and Nabisco early on, or the Nickelodeon-forward Viacom days post-2005. From a political economic perspective, the financial economy surrounding these games, then, is one based on the commodification of the audience. In this sense, the economic models for gaming sites like neopets relate more closely to the model for television than for console video games. Children have become a commodity audience for media companies to sell and advertisers to buy. Dallas Smythe famously wrote, "of the off-the-job work time, the largest single block is time of the audiences which is sold to advertisers. It is not sold by workers but by the mass media of

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[3] Jackie Marsh, "Young Children's Play in Online Virtual Worlds," *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 8, no. 1 (February 2010): 25, https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X09345406.

communications" (2013, 33). While children might not have "on-the-job" time per se, we can consider time when they aren't attending school, completing homework, or doing chores to occupy a similar leisure time framework. The audience commodity is the sale of the audience's free time to the benefit of the purchaser (advertisers) and the seller (media producers and distributors). Considering the history of companies like Viacom, it seems as though they were already pre-disposed for bringing the model they had used on channels like CBS, MTV, and Nickelodeon into the digital age. From their beginning, free games online did not exist in a vacuum but as part of a larger platform, often acting as bait to get users onto a site or into a bulletin board or usenet server. As large corporations began to colonize the world wide web, they brought their own properties online, and needed a way to attract users. In one sense the "free lunch" is the games themselves and the platform on which they sit, a smorgasbord of content designed to keep eyeballs in front of advertisers. But, as Marc Andrejevic argues, the "free lunch," or the "lure," of the digital era is not only the content but also the organization of content, or the platform and algorithms.[4] In the case of games like Neopets, which rely on their userbase to generate content so they can continue selling branded slots to large companies, the connections that users made to each other was often an equal if not larger draw to the site compared to the games. Eran Fisher notes that social media sites must de-alienate their audience to make their more active engagement of posting and sharing feel worthwhile authentic.[5] This necessary move toward de-alienation opens up a space for social media users to engage with

[4] Marc Andrejevic, "'Free Lunch' in the Digital Era: Organization Is the New Content," in *The Audience Commodity in a Digital Age: Revisiting a Critical Theory of Commercial Media*, ed. Lee McGuigan and Vincent Manzerolle, Digital Formations (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 198.

[5] Eran Fisher, "How Less Alienation Creates More Exploitation? Audience Labour on Social Network Sites.," *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 10, no. 2 (May 25, 2012): 171–83, https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v10i2.392.

each other and their own identities in an active way. But that increased activity is also exploited in that it requires more effort and engagement on the part of the commoditized audience.

Work is the Play of Childhood

In order to understand the values produced and reproduced around and by children playing games on the internet, it helps to first contextualize the relationship between children and interactive media. "Children," as Henry Jenkins puts it, "are active participants in that process of defining their identities, though they join those interactions from positions of unequal power. When children struggle to reclaim dignity in the face of a schoolyard taunt or confront inequalities in their parents' incomes, they are engaged with politics just as surely as adults are when they fight back against homophobia or join a labor union."[6] So, children are in some ways political actors. But the theories for how children *become* political actors vary. Though some sociologists and developmental psychologists take a deterministic approach to stages of development, this chapter will think primarily with William Corsaro's theory of interpretive reproduction. Interpretive reproduction posits that socialization is neither a top-down process nor an individualized process but rather relies on the roles of language and cultural routines in the peer cultures of children. They interpret, remix, and reinvent the language and routines of the "adult world" and reproduce them in their own culture. For Corsaro, "socialization is not only a matter of adaptation and internalization but also a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction. Central to this view of socialization is the appreciation of the importance of collective, communal activity—how children negotiate, share, and create culture with adults and

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[6] Henry Jenkins, ed., "Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths," in *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 4.

each other."[7] This theory of socialization requires the politicization of childhood because it demands that we as researchers take seriously the worldbuilding of childhood on its own terms. Children construct their own meanings and social structures. Work on childhood that doesn't consider the active role that children play in their own development is incomplete. For studying children's use of interactive media in virtual worlds, understanding their agency within the process is important. Tuukanen et al. write that "the view of children's competence forms a basis for understanding their roles as participants in virtual worlds. Our basic argument is that a starting point for considering children as participants is the view of children as competent agents."[8] Therefore, this chapter considers not only the messaging of cultural norms that children receive online, and the technological and social affordances that reinforce this messaging, but also the ways in which they reinvent, resist, or remix those norms.

In many ways, this chapter is in conversation with the areas of history, media studies, and cultural studies vis-à-vis the relationship between children and media, especially in their roles as media consumers and citizens. More specifically, this chapter also engages with the body of work about children's play, both offline and online, that emerges from or influence the fields of new media and video game studies. To some scholars, like historian Philippe Ariès, the very concept of childhood is dependent on the concept of play. He argues that the emergence of childhood as a category necessitated distinguishing between games for children and games for adults, a distinction which also helped stratify classes.[9] When a medium becomes classified as

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[7] William A. Corsaro, *The Sociology of Childhood*, Fourth edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2015), 18.

[8] Terhi Tuukkanen, Ahmer Iqbal, and Marja Kankaanranta, "A Framework for Children's Participatory Practices in Virtual Worlds," *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 3, no. 2 (2010): 10.

[9] Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 91–92.

lower class—comic books, trash tv, video games—it is perhaps not coincidental that those media also become presented as dangerous to the wellbeing of children, as if their class associations were proof positive of their corrupting effects. Nearly as long as there have been scholarly works on the relationship between children and media, there have been scholars that were concerned about the ramifications of media consumption and the media environment on the ontological existence of childhood as a category. From Fredric Wertham's warning that comic books were causing juvenile delinquency to Neil Postman's argument that television poses an unnatural risk to children in the home, there has been persistent attention toward children's media consumption.[10] Such fears continue on into the digital age, with children's media scholars—often completely justifiably—maintain concerns about the intense levels of consumerism, privacy issues, and datamining.[11] These scholars tend to put the blame on corporations for instituting these practices in the first place, and on governments for failing to regulate these spaces.

Though certainly well-meaning, these conceptions of children sometimes subscribe to an almost hypodermic model of media effects that discounts the agency of the child. It's true that children use media as locus of building identity. But instead of only understanding the media as constructing identities for children, what if we also understood it as a tool used by children in the construction of their own identities? Thinking with Corsaro's interpretive reproduction, we might

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[10] Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (Port Washington, N.Y: Kennikat Press, 1972); Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

[11] See: Rhon Teruelle, "Stealing the Age of Innocence: A Critique of the Commodification of Children's Culture Through an Analysis of NeoPets," *Teaching and Learning* 6, no. 1 (March 31, 2011), https://doi.org/10.26522/tl.v6i1.377; Olesya Venger, "Internet Research in Online Environments for Children: Readability of Privacy and Terms of Use Policies; The Uses of (Non)Personal Data by Online Environments and Third- Party Advertisers," *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 10, no. 1 (2010); Grace Chung and Sara M. Grimes, "Data Mining the Kids: Surveillance and Market Research Strategies in Children's Online Games," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 30, no. 4 (January 10, 2006): 527–48, https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2005v30n4a1525.

understand children as participating in what Stuart Hall might call a negotiated reading from their positionality *as* children, accepting some messaging and rejecting others.[12] To be certain, children tend not to possess the same sophisticated levels of media literacy that adults do, and it only makes sense to protect their wellbeing more strictly online. At the same time, many scholars have argued that rather than simply taking in media at face value, they become trained as both consumers of media and as citizens writ large through acts of media consumption and play. Though video games are a clear example of where children's purposeful play and varied interactions with the medium result in a more complex relation to the messaging than simply taking it in at face value, children have always negotiated media messaging through active participation. In her discussion of children's television viewership as and identity building and socializing practice, Marsha Kinder notes that, rather than seeing Saturday morning tv and VHS watching habits as a passive viewer experience, children are actively engaging in decisions--what to watch, when to change the channel, which tape to play, when to fast forward, etc.[13] She argues that the complex intertextuality of corporate synergy, transmedia storytelling, and video games, media consumption hails children as postmodern capitalist subjects. The rapidly changing media landscape at the end of the twentieth century didn't also created new forms of media consumption, new literacies, that altered the way that children understood not only media but also society and each other. In regard to tween engagement with branded fiction, Diane Carver Sekeres (2009) calls this locus of multimodal engagement (in the form of literature, television, toys and games, websites, etc.) with brand texts the "playspace." Ultimately, she asks

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[12] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Routledge, 2006).

[13] Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993), 36.

"Could the playspace, in its collaborative, distributive creation, lead to the workspace of a more equitable society, or will it be a precursor to a privileged use of economic advantage?"[14] Though I think that the true answer to that question is in many ways both rather than either or, Sekeres' argument demonstrates a need to play closer attention to children's modes of engagement across media lines.

This chapter, though, will use video games and the internet as its primary media lens. Children (and adults for that matter) playing on the internet has specific social ramifications—and opportunities—for identification. Sonia Livingstone identifies three primary modes in which the internet provides opportunities for children: "explorations of the self, traditional and alternative modes of learning, and opportunities for civic participation."[15] Though, as we will see, these modes are sometimes difficult to untangle from each other, I am most interested in how these explorations of the self manifest in unique forms of socialization and identity formation. Though utopian ideals of the internet as the ultimate equalizer were clearly misplaced, there are many functions of the anonymized avatar-based spaces that make up children's playgrounds in virtual worlds that provide for a multiplicity of identity formation practices. In her discussion of her daughter's interactions with other users on *Club Penguin*, Diana Burley observed that the ability to experiment with the more typically static elements of their real-life persona—clothing, styling, skin color, gender, and the like—and the relative lack of social

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[14] Diane Carver Sekeres, "The Market Child and Branded Fiction: A Synergism of Children's Literature, Consumer Culture, and New Literacies," *Reading Research Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (October 12, 2009): 412, https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.44.4.6.

[15] Sonia Livingstone, "Internet, Children, and Youth," in *The Handbook of Internet Studies*, ed. Mia Consalvo and Charles Ess, Handbooks in Communication and Media (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 352.

pressures open new spaces for exploration of identity and pro-social interaction with others.[16] Still, children's play, especially online, exists in a liminal space where it is understood to on one hand have explicit social and developmental benefits, and on the other hand seen as having explicit risks. But it may actually be this specific combination of sociality and risk that fosters identity development in kids. In the case of new media, children and teens are able to test the waters of independence, take risks, and navigate complicated social situations. In *Children, Media, and American History,* Margaret Cassidy suggests "children who are not given ample opportunities to explore their independence may have trouble learning how to handle it confidently."[17] It is also worth mentioning that children's online social interactions are not monolithic. They are dependent on a number of different axes of identity and social locations, including age, technological literacy, gender, class and racial backgrounds, etc. Nor are children's play styles uniform. They may come to a virtual world for different reasons and engage with games at different levels, though these play styles are often also informed by the aforementioned axes of identity. For example, boys tend to be socialized to focus more explicitly on games and competition, so may favor the less social aspects of Neopets like the flash games, where girls (and many queer boys, as we will see) may focus more on the social components like message boards as well as pet care. As Rebecca Willett (2017) notes, paying specific attention to the different structures that shape children's online experience is crucial in understanding both the potential risks and rewards of online access. Likewise, Alper et al. (2016) suggest not only that children and media scholars continue a recent trend toward researching diverse children and

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[16] Diana Burley, "Penguin Life: A Case Study of One Tween's Experiences inside Club Penguin By Diana," *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 3, no. 2 (2010): 3–13.

[17] Margaret Cassidy, *Children, Media, and American History: Printed Poison, Pernicious Stuff, and Other Terrible Temptations* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 137–138.

families, but also that they should consider identity and positionality in thinking through the rights and legislation that should be advocated.

Methods and Methodology

Neopets as a historical document poses a particular problem for historical research. Specifically, Neopets is not housed on the internet archive. There is no way to examine the site per se as it existed at the time that this dissertation chapter will cover (about 1999 to 2009). This is doubly true because Flash, the platform on which Neopets ran almost in its entirely at this time, was discontinued in 2020. That means that the Neopets experience as it existed is nearly impossible to replicate, even if I were to ignore the social aspect of the site entirely. Instead of relying on archived versions of the site, then, I will explore somewhat of a triangulation of methods intended on understanding the user experience for children and young adults who would have been using Neopets at the time. This approach will consist of three methods: critical media industry studies; written accounts and interviews from previous Neopets players; and two forms of archive. These archives include fan sites which host extensively archived versions of the visuals that existed on Neopets—despite lacking the interactivity—and Flashpoint, the archive of over 100,000 Flash games which includes, to my knowledge, every Neopets game that was built in Flash or Shockwave.

Critical Media Industry Studies

My method of inquiry into media industries owes in large part to the framework laid out by Havens, Lotz, and Tinic in “Critical Media Industry Studies.” The authors are uninterested in both macro-level political economic approaches which feature solely on looking at the media

industries through the lens of capital, and micro-level audience studies. Rather, they advocate a methodology that "emphasizes midlevel fieldwork in industry analyses, which accounts for the complex interactions among cultural and economic forces."[18] This chapter is an attempt to locate competing and complementary discourses within the US media industries that construct the child as consumer. It is interested in the ways in which seemingly disparate actions coalesce in particular logics and boundaries and "common-sense" that have real material consequences. And it understands power to be a conversation between multiple actors both inside and outside of the corporation being studied. In order to understand these processes and motivations, this paper will investigate a combination of semi-embedded deep texts which "function as go-betweens that facilitate institutional dialogue and (sometimes) contracting between media corporations and trade associations" and publicly-disclosed deep texts which are "self- consciously directed at the viewing public."[19] For the critical media approach to Neopets I will be examining news sources; trade press articles; and corporate earnings statements, annual reports, and marketing materials from Viacom.

Oral History and Affective Archives

I will look to the idea of collective memory to consider how contemporary interviews and autobiographical history from people who used Neopets as children can work in generating knowledge and making meaning. Of course, memories of events 10 or 20 years ago are not always factually accurate. But even these inaccuracies can be historically useful. As Alessandro

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[18] Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (June 2009): 235, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2009.01037.x.

[19] John Thornton Caldwell, "Cultures of Production: Studying Industry's Deep Texts, Reflexive Rituals, and Managed Self-Disclosures," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, 1 edition (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 207–209.

Portelli writes, "The discrepancy between fact and memory ultimately enhances the value of the oral sources as historical documents…creatively generated by memory and imagination in an effort to make sense of crucial events and of history in general."[20] Collective memory allows not only to understand the subject more deeply, but to understand the affective drives of the past that move people into memory. By this I mean that even inaccuracies help us understand the motivations and values of a community when they are held by multiple people—how do they look back at this time and what strikes them as important. I will not be relying on these interviews and accounts for information about Neopets, which is well-documented in contemporary news and industrial sources. Rather, I want to know what about Neopets the users took with them, and how their time on the site contributed to their understanding of themselves.

By Kids, For Profit

Though media has always operated as an ideological apparatus, the particular mode of media consumption and programming changed qualitatively with the rise of narrowcasting toward youth in the 80s and 90s. Companies like Disney, Viacom, and Time Warner began to use the relatively new medium of cable television to create networks that were specifically marketed to children. By far the most-watched of these networks until well into the aughts was Viacom's Nickelodeon, whose unique messaging of kid power proved to be a hit with young viewers. Programming like The Kids Choice Awards which began in 1988, and Nick News with Linda Ellerbee, which ran from 1992 to 2015, put the perspectives of real kids front and center in the programming, developing a kind of kid viewer citizenship. The recognition of children as

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[20] Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, SUNY Series in Oral and Public History (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1991), 26.

unique agents, with Nickelodeon acting as a kind of "by kids for kids" network meant that children were being courted as a specific audience with unique tastes. This meant that kids could be marketed to, but also that they were acknowledged as legitimate agents with a subculture often different from or even opposed to that of adults. In Kids Rule: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship, Sarah Banet-Weiser catalogues Nickelodeon's often ambivalent position toward children as consumer citizens. As she puts it, Nickelodeon exemplifies "the tensions surrounding how young Americans are interpellated as both citizens-in-training and consumers in contemporary culture."[21] These tensions are exemplified by the programming and marketing decisions of Nickelodeon that put them in opposition to the world of adults. Banet-Weiser writes:

> An important element of Nickelodeon's self-construction is the network's insistence that kids are an active audience in their own right, separate from the world of adults. Indeed, as much of Nickelodeon's programming demonstrates, "adults just don't get it." Part of what adults "just don't get" is the consumption habits of youth, which are important markers of identity and ways of distinguishing one social group from another. The boundary between the worlds of children and adults that is implied by the idea that adults "don't get" the world of children is important to the self-construction of children as particular kinds of citizens.[22]

Nickelodeon's focus on children as an active audience clearly demonstrates a vision from Viacom on the ideal child consumer. It requires a fine distinction between a customer that is active and a customer that thinks too much for itself. As Buckingham and Tingstad write, "The paradox of contemporary marketing is that it is bound to construct children as active, desiring and autonomous, and in some respects as resisting the imperatives of adults, while

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[21] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*, Console-Ing Passions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

[22] Ibid., 33–34.

simultaneously seeking to make them behave in particular ways."[23] In the case of Neopets, those ways by and large included viewing advertisements and branded materials, engaging interactively with themed games and surveys, and chatting with friends and other community members.

By the 1990s, it was clear to most media conglomerates that children were a specific and targetable demographic that could be advertised to. Television stations such as Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network (Time Warner), and the Disney Channel were developed with this particular audience in mind. These channels not only targeted children through advertising, but in that targeting acknowledged them as active subjects and citizens with specific interests and goals. Continuing after the boom of cable, these companies were looking for ways to expand into other forms of media. One medium that was primed for expansion was the internet. As I described in the previous chapter on Newgrounds, children and young adults were already playing games on the web. One year before Viacom purchased Neopets, a study in the UK found that 84% of children used the internet and that 70 percent of them used it specifically to play games.[24] It should be no wonder, then, that corporations began to set up their own online arcades at the end of the 90s in an attempt to establish themselves in internet spaces. Nickelodeon began to integrate video games and television programming in 1992 with the release of the series *Nickelodeon Arcade* and began its first foray into online branded gaming content a few years later. This manifested in the form of "clickamajigs," a series of what we might now call microgames where kids performed such gamified actions as appeasing a crying baby or getting revenge on a bully. Disney, for its part, created a hybrid programming block for tweens and teens

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[23] David Buckingham and Vebjørg Tingstad, "Introduction," in *Childhood and Consumer Culture*, ed. Vebjørg Tingstad and David Buckingham (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 6.

[24] Livingstone, "Internet, Children, and Youth," 349.

called “Zoog Disney,” which was predicated on viewers seeing the characters, called “zoogs” on tv and then being able to interact with them on zoogdisney.com. This launch was part of an active push by Disney both to appeal to a slightly older demographic, and also to move into the online space. As the network’s senior vice president of marketing Eleo Hensleigh explained at the time “the idea was to really create an entertainment experience that converged the two interests in our audience…They spend a lot of time with television, a lot of time with the Internet. We want to make sure we're where kids are spending time.”[25] At Nickelodeon, executives also recognized that children were beginning to more easily switch between internet and television habits. Nick online game designer David Vogler explained “convergence is more about relationships it's another way of us building our relationship with the audience…to a kid, the two mediums (TV and the Internet) don't cannibalize each other, they enhance each other. ... Kids are the most open-minded about things. ... This is completely natural to them.”[26] In other words, children’s media habits were growing more sophisticated and networks increasingly felt pressured to keep up with them by appealing to their transmedia tastes.

In November of 1999—amid the heyday of the dot com bubble, and just three months before the NASDAQ would hit its peak in March, British students Adam Powell and Donna Williams launched Neopets.com. At its core, Neopets was a site that the two built as a way of having fun with their friends and maybe other like-minded enthusiasts. As Powell puts it, the site was a way to “keep university students entertained, and possibly make some cash from banner

[25] David Bloom, “DIGITAL L.A. : TRULY, IT’S ALL HAPPENING AT THE ZOOG,” *Daily News*, 26 1998, https://web.archive.org/web/20110624034114/http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-83849759.html.

[26] Kathi Scrizzi Driscoll, “Kids at Heart,” Cape Cod Times, March 18, 2000, https://www.capecodtimes.com/story/news/2000/03/18/kids-at-heart/51026992007/.

advertising."[27] They could not have anticipated the immediate draw of the site, which began to draw thousands of page views every day. In an attempt to keep up with the demand, the small UK-based team sold the site to American market research analyst Doug Dohring, who purchased a majority share of the site in January of 2000 and moved the headquarters of the site to Glendale, California.[28] Neopets continued to grow under Dohring's management, and in 2005 he sold the site to Viacom for $160 million. Viacom, for their part, was undergoing a corporate rebrand in the mid-aughts. For them, the acquisition of Neopets represented what Viacom chair Sumner Redstone called "an accelerated expansion into new and emerging platforms."[29]

Neopets operates as what scholars have come to call "virtual worlds." Though the term seems as though it could refer to any game world or online space, it has evolved specifically in academia as a way to discuss mediated interactive experiences where users can interact with each other. Mark W. Bell defines a virtual world as "a synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers."[30] In the case of Neopets, the avatars that represent users are simple squares that have pictures of neopet species or other site-related imagery. In contrast to many other virtual worlds, the avatars themselves do not carry much semantic meaning for users. Instead, users' neopets, pet pages, user profiles, and other information attached to their accounts tell other players much more information about them. The primary purpose of Neopets, on paper, is for users to adopt pets and care for them with food,

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[27] Martin Headon, "Pet Hates," The Guardian, October 30, 2002, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2002/oct/31/games.onlinesupplement.

[28] David Kushner, "The Neopets Addiction," *Wired*, December 2005, https://www.wired.com/2005/12/neopets/.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Mark W Bell, "Toward a Definition of 'Virtual Worlds,'" *Journal For Virtual Worlds Research* 1, no. 1 (2008): 2, https://doi.org/10.4101/jvwr.v1i1.283.

toys, grooming, and other forms of interaction. On top of the pets, one of the site's major draws was its library of proprietary Flash games, which is currently being reconstructed in HTML 5. As one 2010 ad put it, "you can play games, more games, hundreds of games!"[31] To pay for items for their pets, players use the in-game currency neopoints, which they can earn in a variety of ways. Players can earn neopoints by playing games, including such options as *Meerca Chase, Hassee Bounce, and Turmac Roll*. Some of these games also have product tie-ins, but most are simple reconstructions of popular games like snake, minesweeper, and arcade staples like *Breakout* that use Neopets-specific imagery. Other activities that can earn Neopoints include buying items and selling them for a profit in the player's own shop, spinning prize wheels, completing quests, playing scratch cards, and participating in the stock market which is called the Neodaq. Players can also explore Neopia, a planet which has several lands with different shops and activities, such as the pirate-themed Krawk Island, the medieval-themed Meridell, and the jelly-themed Jelly World. Socially, players can engage with each other on forums (NeoBoards), over the site's private DMs (NeoMail), or in semi-private guilds (NeoGuilds). These guilds, user profiles, and each individual pet's page can all be customized with HTML and CSS, allowing users to represent their own interests and points of view so long as they can master basic coding skills. Other activities include battling other neopets in the battledome, participating in site-wide plots, and playing in the Altador Cup, which is a world cup-esque event where users choose a land to represent and play a Neopets version of soccer to win the tournament for their team as well as prizes. This is in addition to smaller activities like puzzles and random events, as well as quests and holiday-specific offerings such as the annual advent calendar in December.

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[31] *Neopets Brand 2010 Spot* (New York: the designists, 2010).

If that sounds like a lot, it's because it is. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Neopets consistently rated as one of the internet's "stickiest" sites, a measurement of how much time individual users spend on a given site per week. A Nielsen measurement put the site at fourth in terms of average time spent among US users.[32] It was these numbers that enticed Dohring to purchase the site. Theoretically, after all, the more time a user spends on a site the more advertising they could be subject to. Dohring's key to success was not simply advertising to a captive audience of kids, though. It was his specific approach to the ads that were successful. In order to market to children, Neopets needed to conform to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA) 15 U.S.C. §§ 6501–6506. This amendment to the US Code made it illegal for online organizations to collect information from children under the age of 13 without parental permission. In response, Neopets restricts certain activities like message board posting and private chats, as well as page customization, to users older than age 13. To compensate for being unable to serve targeted ads, Neopets developed what Dohring called "immersive advertising" to serve sponsored content to children. Examples include a game where you collect Lucky Charms™ marshmallows or a game where you brush a neopet's teeth with Crest™ toothpaste. These features were the most widely criticized aspects of Neopets by parents and advocacy groups, who felt as though children were being brainwashed. *Adbusters* Editor-in-Chief Kalle Lasn said in an interview with the *New York Times* "[Children] are not smart enough to work out the packaging. We are targeting kids before they are old enough to figure these things out. They can't tell the difference between an ad and non-ad content. It's all just one big blur in a big

[32] Nick Wingfield, "Web's Addictive Neopets Are Ready for Big Career Leap," *Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2005.

attention-getting device."[33] The fear, then, is that young children who cannot differentiate between advertisement and content will simply fall victim to brainwashing on behalf of food and media corporations. The fact that companies like McDonalds and General Mills had starring roles in Neopets products was also of concern to both parents and advocates, who worried that food advertising was making children unhealthy.[34] This fear of the power of sugar and other food advertising on children mirrors debates that were had on children's television in the 1970s. Between 1978 and 1981, watchdog group Action for Children's Television (ACT) fought the FTC on ads for candy and sugary breakfast cereal. The ACT, like Lasn above, that children were not sophisticated enough to criticize or ignore these ads. But, as Heather Hendershot argues, these arguments were complicated. "These are dubious claims on several counts. "For one thing," she writes:

> the speaker underestimates the intelligence of children, who voice skepticism about ads at an early age. Moreover, he/she assumes that adult viewers make 'very sophisticated health judgments' and 'long-range abstract decisions' about food products they see advertised, when actually adults are just as likely as children to buy a food product because they like its image, not its nutritive value.[35]

Hendershot's point that the actual relationship between children and advertising is complicated, and that just because a child may have higher brand recognition as a result of advertising (as is the case on Neopets), that doesn't mean that they are necessarily uniquely susceptible is equally applicable to children on Neopets as it was to children watching TV in the 70s. The fear that ads

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[33] Marc Weingarten, "As Children Adopt Pets, A Game Adopts Them," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2002, https://web.archive.org/web/20150728215320/http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/21/technology/as-children-adopt-pets-a-game-adopts-them.html.

[34] Stephen Kline, "Countering Children's Sedentary Lifestyles: An Evaluative Study of a Media-Risk Education Approach," *Childhood* 12, no. 2 (May 2005): 242, https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568205051906.

[35] Heather Hendershot, *Saturday Morning Censors: Television Regulation before the V-Chip*, Console-Ing Passions (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1998), 83.

on free television provoked in the 70s is the same fear that ads on free games provoked in the 00s.

Despite the historical precedent, the consensus opinion of the vast majority of contemporary accounts of Neopets is that the tragedy of the site is the introduction of heavily branded materials into what would be an otherwise pure player experience. One contemporary journalist wrote “the Web site's brand of "immersive advertising," in which corporations sponsor games with advertising messages embedded inside, has some child advocates and parents fuming. Neopets is part of a mushrooming -- and controversial -- industry in which corporations spend an estimated $15 billion a year advertising to children.”[36] Watchdog groups like Ralph Nader’s Commercial Alert lobbied against Neopets’ practices, arguing that they were not doing enough to label their branded content as advertising.[37] And scholars like Steven Kline claimed that Neopets’ food advertisements directly contributed to a growing obesity epidemic. I take issue with these characterizations for a few reasons.[38] Firstly, 80% of the site’s users in 2002 were between 12 and 17 years old.[39] That age group is hardly too young to differentiate between truth and fiction when it comes to advertisements. More concretely, these fears seem to more reflect a fear of a *theoretical* child being harmed due to a new media we don’t quite understand and feel similar to the violent video game arguments to me. Just as we should be skeptical of the use of the figure of the innocent child to propel political aims, we should take a second look at generalized media effects claims. When taking into account the actions of real children using

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[36] K. Oanh Ha, “Neopets Site for Children Stirs Controversy,” *The St. Augustine Record*, October 2, 2004.

[37] Wingfield, “Web’s Addictive Neopets Are Ready for Big Career Leap.”

[38] Kline, “Countering Children’s Sedentary Lifestyles.”

[39] Weingarten, “As Children Adopt Pets, A Game Adopts Them.”

these platforms, we can see that children and young adults are often aware of the pitfalls of using these sites, sometimes more than adults. Rebecca Willet notes that preteens in particular are unlikely to participate in many of the complicated social aspects of a site, or even have terribly deep investments in them, ultimately concluding "children's virtual world game activities in this study [of students age 8-10] do not match common concerns associated with children online: spending many hours every day, taking social risks, and being exploited by companies…Rather, their engagements in virtual world games are more casual in terms of investments in time, friendships, and economics."[40] Even in an article debating the practice on Neopets, the *New York Times* quotes an 11-year-old who is well aware that she is being served an ad, though she shows less skepticism than an adult might. Of the game *Limited Too: Mix & Match,* she says "It's got good advertising and fun colors and shows you things you might want to buy in real life."[41] I do not wish to argue that the audience labor as a commodity is not exploited. To the contrary, the increasing monetization of user data online proves that the audience commodity is as ripe as ever for exploitation, in the classical Marxist sense of creating surplus value for a company but also in the everyday way of being subject to manipulation and privacy concerns. But I would argue that the positioning of Neopets as a particularly insidious advertiser has more to do with a fear of the relatively new medium of the internet than it does with actual grounded. To be sure, the use of generalized surveys to earn neopoints and other methods of extracting information from children falls under the same data umbrella that deserves scrutiny. But it isn't clear that the methods that Neopets uses specifically are uniquely exploitative. Neopets, for its part, stresses that the vast

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[40] Rebekah Willett, "'Friending Someone Means Just Adding Them to Your Friends List, Not Much Else': Children's Casual Practices in Virtual World Games," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 23, no. 3 (June 2017): 338, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856515599513.

[41] Weingarten, "As Children Adopt Pets, A Game Adopts Them."

majority of its content is not advertising, and also uses the site's freeness as a justification for including such advertising in the first place.[42]

Instead of treating branded content as an intrusion, I propose that this content is of particular importance into understanding the game flows of Neopets and, more importantly, of the meta-behaviors of site users. I would contend, in actuality, that the advertisements and product integrations into Neopets were more of a selling point than many of the features of the site themselves. Children are not particularly interested in the economic features that Powell and Williams put into the game like a stock market, marginal reselling of items, and interest rates. They are interested in Disney movies, Nickelodeon cartoons, and Ritz Bitz. For example, on a post about Nickelodeon's branded sponsorship deals, one user wrote "I like it becaues [sic] it has a McDonald's Shop" and other users wrote that they enjoyed the McDonalds and Disney tie-in properties or were sad that they didn't have them in their home countries.[43] In another example, children who were introduced to Neopets in a computer lab made a game of how much branded content they could find on the site.[44] Perhaps ironically, the branded content of Neopets in some ways served as free lunch for children which encouraged them to engage in more complicated metagaming practices and, ultimately, behaviors that both implicated them into larger capitalist systems but at the same time provided moments of resistance to both the dominant structures of capital and hegemonic attitudes surrounding gender and sexuality, especially in the aughts.

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[42] Ellen Seiter, *The Internet Playground: Children's Access, Entertainment, and Mis-Education*, Popular Culture & Everyday Life, v. 10 (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 96.

[43] Taylor, "Welcome to Neopets' Neopia, 25 Million Strong -- Analysis from Intuitive Stories," *Intuitive Stories* (blog), December 18, 2005, https://intuitivestories.com/welcome_to_neopets_neopia_25_million_strong.html.

[44] Seiter, *The Internet Playground*, 99.

Getting Gay in the Guild

Just as with Nickelodeon, the interpellation of Neopets users as active subjects both brought them under the banner of the Viacom brand and also presented them autonomy in terms of their identities and forms of citizenship. Moreover, social media and virtual worlds often ask additional labor of their audiences in the form of moderation and user-generated content. In their discussion of MySpace, Coté and Pybus note that the affective dimensions of social media use, and in particular the building and maintaining of profiles, is a crucial extension to the larger conversations of immaterial and free labor often required in social media sites.[45] As I have written elsewhere on the free labor of queer mods, free labor that directly results in the increased freedom and comfort of queer people ought to be considered a form of affectively necessary labor that allows queer people to exchange the economic value presented to the platform with the affective value of the ability to play with and feel secure in their own queer identities.[46] The work of this section builds on that previous article by exploring the labor in the context of websites for children and understanding one's own queer identity. In other words, much like the previous chapter on Newgrounds, the free nature of Neopets means not only that it is cost-free and easily accessible to any children who have an internet connection and want to play, but also that there is a level of freedom in determining what the site looks like and how it can best serve the needs of the user. I think freeness also serves another purpose on Neopets; children and teens can use the service and access any of the areas of the site without having to ask their parents to pay for it,

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[45] Mark Coté and Jennifer Pybus, "Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0: MySpace and Social Networks," *Ephemera* 7, no. 1 (2007): 89.

[46] Tom Welch, "The Affectively Necessary Labour of Queer Mods," Game Studies 18, no. 3 (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/welch.

which can often result in more active monitoring on the parts of parents. Instead, users can interact without parental permission.

Because Neopets is a free website, it relies on user-generated content to keep its users engaged outside of its core gameplay. One example of user-generated content is the Neopian Times, in which users can submit stories and articles which grant them special avatars if they are chosen to be published. In a personal case study, Stephanie Lu reflects on her time in the community that writes to be published in the Neopian Times. She writes that her time in that community strengthened her skills as a writer and allowed her to be social in a way that was different from her real life, making friends in a guild specifically for writers. She credits Neopets and the Neopian Times with a self-confidence that she took with her to college.[47] Writing for *Slate,* Sabrina Imbler notes a similar relationship to Neopets as a place where she could feel comfortable. She writes:

> I kept playing Neopets in middle school because it has become a lifeline. During a time that my face and body unpredictably secreted oil and sprouted hair, it was easier to disappear behind a candy-colored avatar and inhabit a world I could control. Neopets was my favorite way to flee real life. I loved zapping my pets in the secret laboratory to change their species, solving quests for exploitative fairies, and playing mini-games until my eyes glazed over. I also found community on the Neopets chat boards, making friends to whom I would tell my deepest secrets even though we'd never meet in person.[48]

Neopets was and in some ways continues to be a platform for affinity and coalition building, as well as identity building. Drawing on the idea of affinity spaces, education scholars Curwood et al. argue that spaces like Neopets are online places where young people can develop their own

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[47] Stephanie Louise Lu, "Growing Up with Neopets: A Personal Case Study," *Journal For Virtual Worlds Research* 3, no. 2 (2010): 14.

[48] Sabrina Imbler, "Climate Change Will Get Us All. I Wish I Was More Beautiful.," *Slate*, December 26, 2018, https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/12/neopets-millennials-support-chatroom.html.

writing and literary practices and build their skills through sharing their work. They note that "By actively participating in affinity spaces around a shared passion, young people can easily access an authentic audience who reads, responds to, and even critiques their written work…young people who feel confident in their abilities are much more motivated than their peers in terms of their effort, persistence, and behavior."[49] In a very real way stories like Lu's show that sites like Neopets can have a big impact on children's academic trajectories.

But it is not simply skill building and friendship that Neopets has helped foster. Several oral histories posted by queer former users of Neopets indicated that it was a place where they were able to explore their own marginalized identities without fear of repercussion. I will examine the stories of Al, Teresa, and Ryan to demonstrate different modes in which Neopets allowed them to express their queer identity. For Al, the process was straightforwardly about the connection that they felt to other people in the neopets community:

> Al, a 28-year-old in Chicago, was part of "a gay Neopets guild" as a tween during the early 00s -- an online community of Neopets fans with a shared interest in caring for their virtual pets, and happened to overwhelmingly identify as queer…when the rainbow color of the Neopets came out I remember that being very exciting," Al says. "I definitely remember telling some other person that my female pets were dating each other and that I had a crush on a girl in my class."[50]

Though Neopets often dissuaded users from sharing personal information, users like Al circumvented those rules to be able to celebrate themselves in a community that they were welcome in. Some Neopets users began to be more explicit and calculated in their circumvention

[49] Jen Scott Curwood, Alecia Marie Magnifico, and Jayne C. Lammers, "Writing in the Wild: Writers' Motivation in Fan-Based Affinity Spaces," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 56, no. 8 (May 2013): 677, https://doi.org/10.1002/JAAL.192.

[50] Sofia Barrett-Ibarria, "Remembering the Golden Age of the Queer Internet," I-d, August 3, 2018, https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/qvmz9x/remembering-the-golden-age-of-the-queer-internet.

of the rules to discuss their identities. Officially, Neopets had a policy that users couldn't discuss sexual orientation or any other "hot topics." The site has made it clear, though, that they forbid this on the grounds of maintaining decorum in forums and guilds, not because of a ban of discussing LGBT identities per se.[51] That has led to some users getting creative about discussing themselves.

Between guilds, forums, and marketplaces, the average Neopets user could shape the game on a meta level—what Boluk and LeMieux would call "metagaming."[52] Even while Neopets primarily operated at a profit-oriented level, its design and affordances allowed its users a lot of latitude in terms of producing content and controlling their experience in the game. Users could customize their own pages for their pets, user profiles, and guilds in HTML, as well as use a modified version of BBC code to markup forum posts. In fact, Neopets still maintains an HTML guide to teach users how to code their own pages. This important aspect of the site became a touchpoint for many young people to begin to code for the first time, especially important for the site's target audience of young women who were less likely to be welcome in other online coding spaces (e.g. Newgrounds).[53] It also became a space for playing with and around the rules of the game. In her autobiographic blog post "Getting Gay in the Guild," Teresa Navarro discusses the methods that she and other LGBTQ Neopets users circumvented the prescribed guidelines to talk to each other more openly and forge connections. One method she

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[51] The Neopets Team, "The Neopian Times - Neopia's Fill-in-the-Blank News Source," Neopets, May 15, 2014, https://www.neopets.com/ntimes/index.phtml?section=editorial&issue=601.

[52] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*, Electronic Mediations 53 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[53] Nicole Carpenter, "'Neopets': Inside Look at Early 2000s Internet Girl Culture," *Variety* (blog), October 23, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/gaming/features/neopets-internet-girl-culture-1202897761/.

describes was the extensive use of code and innuendo to get around chat filters. She describes the protracted ways that users would exchange AIM or MSN handles with each other, which were the preferred chat platforms of the time:

> Usually, an exchange of getting an AIM or MSN Messenger username would result in a person spelling out the letters of a site like "aye-eye-em" or "em-es-en". Then your next challenge was usernames, some of the more daring would type out the username without a care. If you weren't so brave, you would do something like UsomewordShereEandsoonRandNsoforthAME. Each capital letter was a part of the username; everything else was fluff. We learned how to trick and work around filters, just like anybody else.[54]

In fact, it was these specific attempts to circumvent the rules—which required a lot of effort and were risky in the sense that users could be suspended or even banned—that built trust among users and allowed them to feel more comfortable sharing their identities. As Navarro puts it, "It was frustrating but satisfying to get a username across successfully. It almost felt like a notch in the friendship belt was made if a person made an effort to give you their MSN messenger username just because of how daunting the task was."[55] She also explains that the customizable user profiles became a site for disclosing information about gender and sexuality in a coded way:

> The number one thing that I would learn about my friends I met off of Neopets was that most of them fell on the LGBTQIA spectrum. Some people were more obvious about it on the site, but since words like "dating," "kiss," "girlfriend," and "boyfriend," were flagged, it was hard to admit our sexualities when we wanted to. At that time, the "other" option for gender wasn't available for the gender section on usernames either. Often,

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[54] Teresa Navarro, "Getting Gay in the Guild: The LGBT Experience on Neopets in the Early 2000s," *ZEAL* (blog), May 8, 2018, https://medium.com/mammon-machine-zeal/getting-gay-in-the-guild-the-lgbt-experience-on-neopets-in-the-early-2000s-6427f10f04e4.

[55] Ibid.

> women who found themselves on the LGBT spectrum would have their gender marked as male to make a point, myself included.[56]

Something as simple as the chosen gender on a profile could be innocuous enough that it would not get noticed by censors while at the same time sending covert information to fellow users.

Finally, Ryan Khosravi describes coming to terms with his own queer identity not so much through the social components of Neopets, though he did play with friends, but through its aesthetic conventions. Unlike other sites which courted boys, either on purpose or by default, Neopets was seen as being primarily for girls. Though the userbase was only about 60 percent female, the company's partnership with brands like Limited Too gave it a reputation of being for girls.[57] This meant that many of the aesthetics and activities on Neopets were leaned toward the feminine. In point of fact, a 60 minutes story on the science of sexual orientation used the fact that he liked Neopets as proof that one of two twins might be gay. A description of the episode from CBS News reads:

> The bedrooms of 9-year-old twins Adam and Jared couldn't be more different. Jared's room is decked out with camouflage, airplanes, and military toys, while Adam's room sports a pastel canopy, stuffed animals, and white horses… Adam was also proud to show off his toys. "This is one of my dolls. Bratz baby," he said. Adam wears pinkish-purple nail polish, adorned with stars and diamonds… Adam's behavior is called childhood gender nonconformity, meaning a child whose interests and behaviors are more typical of the opposite sex. Research shows that kids with extreme gender nonconformity usually

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Gina Pace, "Kids And Neopets: Who's Getting Fed?," CBS News, February 7, 2006, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kids-and-neopets-whos-getting-fed/.

> grow up to be gay…Jared's favorite game now is Battlefield 2, Special Forces. As for Adam, he says, "It's called Neopets: The Darkest Faerie."[58]

While the segment as a whole may feel strange given current attitudes toward gender and sexuality, it does provide some insight into what kinds of behaviors and interests were considered masculine and what was considered feminine. It is worth noting that a love of Neopets counts as "gender nonconformity" for boys in the same way that playing with dolls, painting one's nails, and collecting stuffed animals do. So, it's perhaps no surprise Khosravi writes that his attempts to customize his Neopet were some of his first inklings that he might be queer:

> My favorite Neopet was Lupe, a blue dog with a handkerchief who just always seemed like he was ready to cuddle on the couch or go find a child trapped in a well. My long term goal for Neopets to get Lupe a Baby Paint Brush. Paint Brushes in Neopets are used to change the appearance of your pet and more than anything, I wanted to turn my Lupe into a puppy.
>
> The Baby Brush is one of the most expensive items in the game, so I spent a lot of time trying to save money. I'd play a lot of my favorite games like "Faerie Cloud Racers" or "Warf Rescue" over and over to try and collect the most Neopoints I could. I'd sell the majority of my items and deposit my earnings into a bank account so it accumulated interest. I was on a mission.[59]

In a coded way, he was using the visual aesthetic of Neopets to explore his femininity. Examining the visual content of the internet is a crucial part of unpacking its meaning. As the *60 Minutes* story above demonstrated, Neopets had an unabashed feminine aesthetic anchored by

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[58] Daniel Schorn, "The Science Of Sexual Orientation - CBS News," March 9, 2006, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-science-of-sexual-orientation/.

[59] Ryan Khosravi, "Neopets Let Me Be A Gay Kid Online - Digg," August 28, 2018, https://digg.com/2018/neopets-gay-kid-online.

the love and care of cute pets. So the fact that Khosravi felt safe in the avowed softness of Neopets is relevant for the state of queerness writ large on the site. He continues:

> Neopets was not something I talked about in the classroom. I don't think talking about a Baby Brush or "Faeire Cloud Racers" would have gone down well with the kids at school. The site is brightly colored and cute, not something a preteen boy could openly take interest in. In fact, as a blossoming gay boy, playing with virtual pets was one of the only ways I could express my more feminine interests…Years before that door opened or even before I discovered my sexuality, Neopets was a place of possibility; a window into another world…I think this is a common experience for gay men, and LGBT people more broadly. We couldn't explore our interests and identities in real life so we did it online, whether that be on Neopets or in gay chat rooms.[60]

The design of Neopets, which allowed this kind of identity exploration, is characteristic of what game designers Avery Alder and Joli St. Patrick call "the fruitful void."[61] For these designers, the specific and purposeful absence of gendered markers in games can be a space for queerness to grow. Because the visually important avatars on Neopets are the pets themselves, they encourage users to explore different aspects of their interests, personalities, and identities.

Neopets was certainly—though perhaps not uniquely—exploitative of its audience of primarily children. Though they developed many strategies to circumvent these rules, at the end of the day children's data was the commodity being sold. But in that space of recognition as an audience with wants and desires, the site also offered an opportunity for self-discovery and growth. In particular, female and queer users found a community and user experience that they may not have been able to find elsewhere.

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Avery Alder and Joli St. Patrick, "Beyond Representation: Queer Mechanics in Tabletop Games," 2013.

Conclusion

A thorough understanding of what virtual worlds like Neopets mean for the children who are using them can help us understand the relationship between free games, value, and identity. It can also help complicate claims that innocent children are not capable of navigating new technologies without becoming victims to predators or to capitalism. The figure of the child, and specifically of the innocent child, has continually been used as a justification for a variety of social and political machinations designed to exert particular forms of power. As of the time of writing this chapter, Republican rhetoric accusing trans and other gender nonconforming adults of being "groomers" has become a central part of their strategy to dominate the culture wars, often acting as the basis for enacting real legislative and material harm onto queer individuals, both adults and children.[62] This rhetoric most closely echoes that of Anita Bryant and her Save Our Children campaign in the 1970s, but as Henry Jenkins puts it "almost every major political battle of the twentieth century has been fought on the backs of our children, from the economic reforms of the progressive era…to contemporary anxieties about the digital revolution."[63] The innocent child acts, then, as a useful shield onto which adult cultural values can be attached and brandished. This shield clearly demarcates the boundaries of acceptable and deviant citizenship.

The foregrounding of the innocent child and idea of "family values" into American politics, as Lauren Berlant points out, creates two positive frames for cultural conservatives. First, it relocates the site of politics from the public sphere and into the home, allowing the legislation of personal and familial sexual politics as the default site of civic ethics *and*

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[62] Melissa Block, "Accusations of 'grooming' Are the Latest Political Attack — with Homophobic Origins," *NPR*, May 11, 2022, sec. National, https://www.npr.org/2022/05/11/1096623939/accusations-grooming-political-attack-homophobic-origins.

[63] Jenkins, "Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths," 2.

relocating political duty to "individual acts of consumption and accumulation," transforming protests into boycotts and replacing rhetoric of the great society into the demonization of the "welfare queen.[64]" Second, the regulation of the public sphere for the eyes of the "innocent child" has the benefit of reducing acceptable public speech to that which would be acceptable for children, or rather, for the version of children that conservatives imagine as being too sensitive to understand.[65]

Understanding the relationship between childhood, identity, and free games on sites like Neopets also helps elucidate the contemporary landscape of online gaming for children. As games like *Fortnite* and *Roblox* continue to expand in popularity, children find new ways of interacting with the world and building relationships and coalitions with each other. Both of these games rely on user-generated content created by children, and both introduce product placement for real-world products, services, and people in the form of gameplay, not unlike Neopets. While I think it is often prudent of parents to monitor these environments, consider the level of advertising, and help their children understand potential dangers online, we might also consider what potentials platforms like these have for helping children develop and grow in their identities and build the skills necessary to be discerning audience members and citizens in the future.

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[64] Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 178.

[65] Ibid., 67.

Chapter 4: Free Games, Queer Games

While chapters two and three of this dissertation focused on games distributed online through the platform Flash, this chapter explores what happens when Flash no longer serves as the primary way of distributing games online. Steve Jobs published the "Thoughts on Flash" letter in April of 2010, stressing the superiority of open platforms like HTML5 that could support the mobile web, which Jobs saw as the future of the internet.[1] Jobs correctly pointed out that Flash was not manageable on mobile platforms like the iPhone due to incompatibility with touch-based navigation and gestures. Of course, Apple had corporate motivations for avoiding Flash, which by that point was a proprietary Adobe software. Nevertheless, free browser-based games continued, as HTML5 and the since-discontinued Unity Web Player allowed developers to embed games directly into browsers without the need to install the increasingly unsupported Flash. Moreover, Steam's free-to-play initiative in 2011 and Leaf Corcoran's release of itch.io in 2013 allowed for more developers to release free games for download or, in the case of itch.io, streaming in-browser. Larger options for sharing more complex games for free helped the developer community grow. But the depreciation of Flash led to somewhat of a bifurcation of independent game distribution. While larger hit indies, often built from games like *Super Meat Boy* and *Braid* that were originally released on Newgrounds began to go mainstream and bring their independent tenacity to platforms like Steam and the Xbox Live Arcade, a new crop of developers who used more accessible tools like the text-adventure development tool Twine and the free 3D development engine Unity began an entirely new genre of game design.

[1] Steve Jobs, "Thoughts on Flash," Apple.com, April 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20100707013305/https://www.apple.com/hotnews/thoughts-on-flash/.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that queer games re-orient what we understand as game labor, game form, and game distribution to suggest new forms of value. While games from large publishers commit to a model of technological capital and independent games focus on building cultural capital, queer games build subcultural capital through their unique use of production and distribution platforms to target a specific audience. Freeness functions in two ways here. First, it provides a low-cost of entry to both developers and players, both of whom presumably come from traditionally marginalized queer communities. The second function of freeness is to provide an open space for developers to experiment and explore themes, gameplay, and narratives that were not traditionally seen in mainstream or even independent games up until this point. Like Newgrounds, this provides an open forum for freedom of expression that becomes limited when success is defined by profit. Both functions enable the generation of alternative forms of value—communal, subcultural, institutional—but at the same time, I think, make it more difficult to create economic value from the games created due to being completely free. In other words, what happened to queer developers after the death of Flash was a choice between creating games that made money and games that meaningfully redefined what was valuable about video games, which necessitated both new gameplay and new forms of distribution

In the chapter that follows I will provide brief parallel histories of the AAA, independent, and queer avant-garde video game production cultures, development, and distribution as they developed in the early to mid 2010s. I will then discuss the methods by which queer developers complicated entrenched value systems—both economic and non-economic—through their development processes and in the final results of their games. I will focus on the use of the text-based game creation platform Twine by artists like Porpentine, abstraction by indie zinesters like Stephen Lavelle, and the re-orientation of AAA game aesthetics toward gay male sexuality by

Robert Yang. I will consider how their particular methods of free distribution—phenome.la, personal website, and itch.io respectively—allowed them to experiment with game form and function, but also potentially limited their ability to make money. I will also explore the rhetorics of alternative distribution suggested by Yang and *Lim* developer merritt k to consider the gift economy of queer games and the personal and communal values at stake in such a model.

When I say queer games, I'm referring to a specific but loose coalition of game development that began around 2012 with the release of Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia*. Bo Ruberg calls this movement "the queer games avant-garde."[23] They write that the stories of these queer developers "point toward a picture of contemporary queer indie game-making as enacting cultural critique through artistic expression. The work of the queer games avant-garde is, by nature, a hybrid creative-critical practice, informed at times by queer and feminist theory and at other times by concepts of queerness that emerge directly from the body."[4] This establishes two things about the queer avant-garde: it naturally functions as a cultural critique, and it is interested in queerness as a theoretical and embodied experience. Ruberg frames this as an artistic and political critique. I would argue that this critique also operates on the level of distribution and value. In fact, both the design *and* distribution of queer games trouble systems of value previously embedded in video game culture, in both AAA and independent spaces. For this reason, I will describe in my case studies both the use of free distribution strategies by queer designers and how those strategies enabled them to make radical choices regarding the form of

[2] Bo Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LBGTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 1.

[3] For ease, in this chapter, I will use the phrase "queer games" or "queer indie games" instead of "queer games avant-garde," but this is in essence the group of games that I am referring to.

[4] Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde,* 19.

their art. These strategies also represent an attempt at freedom from many of the hegemonic principles that govern game development culture, such as technological capital, crunch, and mass-market appeal.

Literature Review

Independent Media

In many ways, queer games are just as much of a response to indie game culture as they are to mainstream game culture. Untangling the various forms of value and labor that permeate independent gaming requires a solid baseline for understanding what independent gaming actually is. For this chapter, I will borrow from scholarly discussions of both independent media and alternative media to define and analyze the indie gaming scene. As Michael Z. Newman discusses in his analysis of American independent cinema, "indie" as a category derives from a complicated interplay of "a cluster of interlocking interpretive strategies."[5] Independence from the larger institutional constraints of Hollywood was the impetus and beginning cultural understanding of independent cinema. Newman writes that "independent cinema originally made its artistic authenticity contingent on the autonomy of its production from major media companies, and as such was distinctive as a cultural genre defined as much by industrial criteria as textual features."[6] But at the same time, this industrial independence was no longer the only attribute that began to define indie culture, due in part to "the mainstream's incorporation of

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[5] Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture*, Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 13.

[6] Ibid., 5.

indie style or because of indie culture's greater investment in aesthetics and identity than economics."[7] Indie film does not simply refer to the economic conditions of production as independent from the Hollywood studio system. Nor is it a specific genre of film aesthetics. Rather, "indie" film culture is a collaboration between artists, institutions, and audiences that takes into account specific viewing practices and cultural touchstones. In some ways, we understand a film as indie only insofar as it is broadly understood by the larger culture in that way. At the same time, it is the use of specific generic, aesthetic, economic, and rhetorical devices that open a film to be understood as indie in the first place.

Jason Wilson takes a similar approach to mapping independent game cultures. He argues that there is no one development structure that defines independent games, but rather a constellation of related practices including small teams, political games, art games, and other forms. It acknowledges that independent games are just as often defining themselves against mainstream production as they are hovering on the margins of the industry in an attempt to gain entry. Independent developers have various motivations and allegiances, from trying to enter the mainstream industry, to government work, to activism. He writes "indie practitioners are variously start-up entrepreneurs, producers of politically engaged inflections of current game genres, hackers and modifiers of existing game software and hardware, vintage gameplay revivalists and explorers of the possibilities of the physical interface."[8] In any case, the idea that independent media exists outside of the mainstream industry is often taken as a given.

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[7] Ibid., 5–6.

[8] Jason Wilson, "Indie Rocks! Mapping Independent Video Game Design," *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture & Policy*, no. 115 (May 2005): 110.

Borrowing from Geoff King, Jesper Juul argues that there are three levels at which media can be independent: financial, aesthetic, and cultural.[9] In this dichotomy lies the assumption that the mainstream industry is a financial monolith that sets aesthetic and cultural standards, and that independent media somehow operates against this monolith. This belief is flawed, as independent "scenes" often develop in symbiosis with larger industries rather than in opposition to them. As James Schamus explains, while independent film might be seen as opposed to the larger Hollywood film industry, the commercial market for American independent cinema was driven first by European television's desire to purchase licenses for non-Hollywood films and later by the funding capital of the emerging home video market.[10] This is all to say that if there is a unifying theory of value in independent media it does not necessarily come from economic value. Rather, the value of independent media in general and independent games in particular lies in their perceived authenticity. According to Juul, an independent game is seen as successful not if it makes a lot of money, but if it gathers social clout from being seen as an authentic representation of the creator's vision. Ironically, the easiest shorthand for authenticity became a stylistic appropriation of older video game graphics which coalesced into what we might call "independent style."[11]

But the perceived authenticity of independent media often masks the industrial realities of the labor and capitalistic entanglements. Indeed, independence is often worn as a mask to hide the fact that independent media often inaccurately posits itself as subversive to the larger

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[9] Jesper Juul, *Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 12.

[10] James Schamus, "To the Rear of the Back End: The Economics of Independent Cinema," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998), 91–105.

[11] Juul, *Handmade Pixels,* 36.

industry when in reality independent games have long been a crucial component of the bottom lines of many large publishers.[12] One need only consider the factor that Xbox Live Arcade had on the success of the Xbox 360, or that the Nintendo Switch would have had a significantly low number of titles available at launch if independent developers didn't fill space in its online store. Thus, independent labor that can be seen as authentic (good work) can actually reify the neoliberal discourses of individual hard work and self-branding that mask its alienation in a larger corporate machine (bad work).

Since the logics of indie games may be an imperfect fit for queer games, I will also bring in alternative media studies in this chapter. Chris Atton's *Alternative Media* is a historically-grounded work that seeks to theorize the loosely-used term "alternative media."[13] For Atton, unlike independent media, which often takes a more apathetic approach to politics, alternative media is very invested in the political task of finding substitutions for mainstream and hegemonic modes of production, distribution, and consumption. He argues that alternative media are meant to offer the means of communication to those who are normally excluded from media production. This media is alternative not only in its content, which is often radical and grassroots in nature, but also in its form and its methods of distribution and community. Using Raymond Williams as a base, he considers alternative media as containing three components: decapitalization, deprofessionalization, and deinstitutionalization. This is not to say that independent media cannot achieve these goals as well, but it may not have the marked intention to do so the way that alternative media does. In any case, grounding an analysis of queer indie games in the principles of both independent media analysis and alternative media allows for a

[12] Paolo Ruffino, "Narratives of Independent Production in Video Game Culture," *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 7, no. 11 (2012): 106.

[13] Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (London ; Thousand Oaks [Calif.]: SAGE, 2002).

deeper understanding of the systems of value, both economic and otherwise, that these games are trading in and how they might eschew traditional modes of capitalization, professionalization, and institutionalization.

Cultural Capital

As has been consistently argued in this dissertation, economic capital is only one method by which value is exchanged in society. Bourdieu makes the distinction between three forms of capital, all of which may be institutionalized in different ways and all of which, given the right circumstances, can be exchanged: economic capital, consisting of liquefiable monetary value which may be institutionalized in the form of money, ownership, and property; social, consisting of social obligations or connections which may be institutionalized in the form of titles or nobility, and cultural capital, or distinction on the basis of social taste, knowledge, and mannerisms which may be institutionalized in the form a formalized education. He further clarifies that cultural capital can be broken down into three constituent forms: embodied cultural capital consisting of mannerisms and mental dispositions, objectified cultural capital in the form of cultural goods such as paintings, instruments, etc.; and institutionalized cultural capital consisting of formalized educational and professional structures.[14]

Particularly of note for Bourdieu is the manner in which cultural capital becomes embodied and internalized through the development and articulation of taste. In particular, he stresses that the ways that members of different social classes judge the aesthetic merits of media

[14] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 243.

and narratives is directly imprinted into the ways that they think about and embody social hierarchies related to class. He writes:

> Different ways of relating to realities and fictions, of believing in fictions and the realities they simulate, with more or less distance and detachment, are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of dispositions (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions. Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.[15]

Crucial to Bourdieu's theory is the *embodiment* of the social relations between classes. Habitus "consists of a set of historical relations 'deposited' within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action."[16] If the interpretation of media and other "systems of dispositions" characterizes and forms the embodied cultural capital of individuals and social classes, then this habitus must also extend—directly or indirectly—to the lived realities of those individuals. The systemic repetitions of acts that produce both gender and class cannot be easily separated. Some queer theorists argue those doing queer political work ought to acknowledge and reckon with how intersecting axes of identities are mutually constitutive in different contexts in order to more readily combat hegemonic norms and structures.[17] In the following I will investigate how both contribute to the specific goals and ideals of queer independent games, and in doing so unpack the relationship between queerness and gaming. This includes the rejection of hegemonic ideas of distribution and value.

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[15] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 5–6.

[16] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, eds., *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Repr (Cambridge: Polity Pr, 1992), 16.

[17] Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 1 (1997): 437–65.

Gift Economies

There is a long anthropological, sociological, and philosophical fixation on the idea of the gift. In almost all cases, the idea of the gift is understood as having specific significance in the political and ethical frameworks of a society. Writing on the process of gift-giving, Marcel Mauss writes that the systems of exchange, of giving and receiving, are fundamental to the expression of culture. In particular, through comparative analysis, he recognizes the expected and enacted ceremonial reciprocation of gift giving as crucial to both individual relationship building and social hierarchies of value, which he calls "potlatch." Mauss identifies three "primary obligations" when it comes to the systemic giving of gifts: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate. The reciprocation of the gift forms a social contract between giver and receiver which, either implicitly or explicitly, forms stronger social bonds on a level higher than the individual. Though Mauss stresses the more formal gifting traditions of cultures that had not yet developed more formalized individual economies, he recognizes that these customs live on today in modern conceptions of value. Ultimately, Mauss arugues that modern societies ought replicate the potlatch to some extent to avoid the social instability that comes from the unequal distribution of wealth in capitalist society. Making the case for social welfare and other programs for the common good, he writes "societies have progressed in so far as they themselves, their subgroups, and lastly, the individuals in them, have succeeded in stabilizing relationships, giving, receiving, and finally, giving in return."[18]

[18] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen & West, 1954), 82–83.

A Social Critique of the Judgement of Gamers

Some queer game theorists and developers have argued that developers must look to queer distribution as well as game texts. Game developer merritt k writes that indie games ought to have a more antagonistic relationship to capitalism. In her piece "I'm a Transsexual Witch Poet Gamecrafter and You Can Too," she says "the product model of videogames that so many of us take for granted has led us to think about play in increasingly restrictive terms, and we need to begin imagining alternatives…Video Games are killing play."[19] In contrast to large games that consist of vast worlds and technical polish, k argues that indie developers can find resistance in smaller games, in twine games, in street games, and in games that emphasize choice and openness. She redefines indie as something more like an ethos than an aspect of production, saying "for me, "being indie" doesn't look like working on a single involved project for years and aiming to get it on Steam or a console marketplace. For me, play is something I weave into my life. It intersects with witchcraft, poetry…and expresses itself in a variety of ways."[20]

k also advocates for new modes of sale and distribution. She ends her piece by stating that "we don't need anyone's permission to imagine new frames for games. We just have to go and do it! Let's make couture, let's tailor games, let's make murals, let's make crafts and gifts. If we start performing these new frames and ways of understanding games, then we will make these things real."[21] Perhaps indie games can reintegrate themselves into the model that Anna Anthropy first described in *Rise of the Video Game Zinesters*, that of hobbyists and

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[19]merritt k, "I'm a Transsexual Witch Poet Gamecrafter and You Can Too," *Mk.net*, February 2014.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

programmers, queers and outsiders making games not out of a desire to make money or to realize a specific vision, but because they have never seen a story like theirs portrayed in a video game before.[22]

On the topic of the economy gifts, authors like Mauss and Appadurai would argue that reciprocation is a necessary component. But not all scholars see gift giving as always already necessitating debt vis-à-vis reciprocation in order to build value. Feminist thinkers have considered how the formation of gift economies might understood to be a feminine economy insofar as reciprocation for gifts is not expected. Helene Cixous argues that the need for reciprocity in the gift stems from a masculine fear of losing ones place in society, and that as a result the masculine gift focuses on debt rather than generosity.[23] She writes that a feminine gift economy could focus on gifts without the expectation of reciprocation, and that in doing so the gift economy can focus on the common good and what we can gain as a society rather than the hierarchies inherently created by reciprocal gift economies.

In “Games without gamers; imagining indie game developer futures,” Robert Yang imagines three new models which independent game development could look to in the future.[24] He names “Games as Couture,” “Games as Murals,” and “Games as Gifts” as potential interjections into the common methods of making and distributing games.

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[22] Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012).

[23] Helene Cixous, “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays,” in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997), 148–73.

[24] Robert Yang, “Games without Gamers; Imagining Indie Game Developer Futures,” *Radiator Blog*, November 15, 2013.

Games as Couture

Yang imagines games as something that can be tailor-made for specific customers and for specific events, rather than something that has more mass appeal. This allows developers to hyper-contextualize their games and make them "fit" only those that order them. Queer games already often access more affective and personal narratives. "Games as Couture" allows developers to create games that fit more within their specific standpoint or the standpoint of the person who commissioned their games. It also posits games as something closer to fashion and art rather than a mass-market consumer good. If games are rhetorically redefined, then it would be more natural for any type of game to address issues of politics, power, and identity. It would make it easier to share more specific games with personal, political messages without having to worry about the game's viability on a larger scale.

Games as Murals

Platforms like Twine make it super easy to share ideas and code across multiple platforms. Because they are HTML documents at their core, they can be easily edited and read in different software and browsers. Sites like philome.la host twine games for free, making server space a non-issue. This makes collaboration extremely easy, and something that would be very exciting to see in other games are more collaborative and open-source games, not in the sense that multiple people in the same team are working on it, but in the sense that the games are a public space where multiple artists can collaborate and work together. Such collaborations would radically shift the meaning of game development. If Twine has already created a generous and open community, then those processes can be brought out to the gaming community at large. There are already signs of this beginning to happen, with events like game jams and workshops

where people are learning to develop games for the first time. But a queer gaming ethic would re-orient itself from individual design and more towards collaboration.

Games as Gifts

What does it look like to make gifts for fun and as crafts to give to friends, family, and strangers, without the expectation of monetary reward? Games as gifts complicates the ethos in game development that all game-making activity must lend itself towards an economic end. Instead, games can be used as tools to build relationships. Twine games are so easy to make and so personal that they would already make easy gifts. A queer ethic of video game production would consider values other than capital as a successful and appropriate end for games. Games could be created for emotional labor rather than economic labor. In a society where labor of care and affect is consistently undervalued and subsumed to "economically productive labor," "Games as Gifts" could complicate that dynamic significantly.

In addition to thinking about the free game distribution economy as one of reciprocal gifts, however, I think it is fruitful to think more metaphorically about queer game distribution creating larger value for the queer community. In other words, we might think about how the act of giving a game away rather than selling it builds value and sends a political message. To what end does giving a game for free to an audience help achieve the potential political or social goals of the queer games avant-garde or work to create value for the player and the developers? I think that part of the answer to that question may lie in the vocations of queer game developers outside of game development itself. Many developers, such as Anna Anthropy and Robert Yang, worked as professors of practice at game schools across the country. Others, like merritt k and Porpentine, supplemented their game work with writing for game publications. Still others, including Stephen Lavelle, bifurcate their distribution strategies with some paid games but many

more free ones. In all cases, queer game development functions much more to generate cultural and subcultural capital for writing, teaching, and other careers. This leads to social cachet that allows these developers to affect both the queer games scene and also the larger industry.

On that note, in order to understand queer indie game distribution, it is worth situating where other forms of video game distribution was in the early 2010s. This requires an analysis of mainstream trends in the larger gaming industry to make clear the ways in which independent games were structuring themselves against the norm. The 2010s heralded a rapidly changing landscape for AAA video games. Facing steep competition from mobile and tablet gaming, Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft needed to differentiate themselves from the ubiquity of apps and microgames. Many outlets began to question whether console gaming was even practical in an age that seemed split between hardcore PC gaming and casual mobile gaming. In a 2014 review, Molly Wood of the *New York Times* wrote "The real question, though, is whether the idea of a console itself is out of date. Mobile gaming on tablets and phones can be as immersive and fun, and obviously more portable. A console for streaming video is redundant when most new televisions have Internet streaming and apps built in, not to mention Internet-connected Blu-ray players, streaming devices like Roku and Apple TV, or even Google's $35 Chromecast."[25] Main industry players continued to stress technological advancement as the selling point of the console gaming experience, with the release of the Wii U in 2012 and the Playstation 4 and Xbox One in 2013. All consoles used an updated AMD chipset, and the PS4 and Xbox One used a 64-bit operating system and larger memories that put them closer to PCs in terms of processing capabilities. The Xbox was also bundled with a Kinect camera that allowed users to control the

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[25] Molly Wood, "Two Game Consoles Battle for a Dubious Prize," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2014, sec. Technology, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/13/technology/personaltech/review-the-xbox-one-versus-the-playstation-4.html.

menus with motion controls, and an integration with smart TVs which made the Xbox an all-in-one device. Both Sony and Microsoft also released updated versions of the consoles, the PS4 Pro and the Xbox One X in 2016 and 2017 to take advantage of smaller form factors and the growing market of 4K televisions that users would want to utilize with their consoles. This console generation continued to traffic in what we might call *technological capital* to accentuate the ways in which technological advancement and progress is seen as most advantageous to new gaming audiences.

As gaming audiences grew, developers are increasingly looking for ways to entice them, both technologically and through marketing. Game budgets had been increasing at a rapid pace, often outpacing the budgets of large blockbuster films. In 2014, Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick called Bungie's space shooter *Destiny* a "$500 million bet."[26] This includes not only development budgets, but marketing budgets as well. In 2016 alone, several major games received substantial television marketing campaigns complete with big-budget soundtracks—*Gears of War 4* with Metallica's "Nothing Else Matters," *Battlefield 1* with The White Stripes' "Seven Nation Army," *Doom* with Refused's "Fight Like Hell" and *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* with David Bowie's "Space Oddity." The commercials for these games combined these songs with emphasis on the crisp graphics afforded by next-generation consoles and PCs. Their trailers zoom in on hyper-lifelike CG faces and photorealistic scenery and vehicles. The ethos of modern video game marketing has become "more is more," with large marketing budgets leading to large sales numbers. In the mid 2010s more than any other time, games have begun to posit

[26] Ronald Glover and Nayak Malathi, "Activision Plans $500 Million Date with 'Destiny'," *Reuters*, May 6, 2014.

themselves as cultural commodities worth spending money on. This position relies not only on excessive marketing budgets, but on connecting that marketing to technological innovation.

But why do video games rely on technological innovation as a marketing strategy? In *Digital Play*, Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witherford, and Greig de Peuter delineate the evolving understanding of video games as cultural commodities in a post-Fordist, postmodernist economy. They describe the mid-century shift from a Fordist economy predicated on "demand management and the manipulation of consumption" and "huge investment into consumer motivation, analysis and advertising" but with little "qualitative composition or indeed the quantitative extent" of demand being systematically investigated.[27] By contrast, post-Fordist markets were "'intersected by a wide variety of consumer targeting strategies' that combine 'hard' demographic indices such as income, occupation, and residential location, with analysis of 'softer' variables such as consumer taste, social attitudes, psychology, and lifestyle."[28] This marketing, with its emphasis on individual personality and difference, mirrors new production techniques. Post-Fordist marketing is both constituted from and creates consumer taste profiles.

For Kline, Dyer-Witherford, and de Peuter, being on the cutting edge of technology is a prerequisite for video games to exist in this type of economy. One might say that video game consumers are drawn to technological innovation, in a desire for the new. But the authors argue that this desire is in fact manufactured by short product cycles and increased marketing efforts of developers and publishers. They describe the concerted push of the game industry during the artificial change of demand from new technologies:

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[27] Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter. *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 72.

[28] Ibid, 72.

> The pace of innovation requires the efforts of intermediaries in the marketing circuit to "build" a consumer audience for the new systems. In 2001 the latest generation of video game consoles was being launched in North America with the support of marketing budgets that soared as high as $200 million dollars. The industry was intensifying and broadening its base of loyal customers with carefully targeted communication; consolidating brands within core markets through TV advertising that featured game characters…Video game marketers and cultural intermediaries strove to infiltrate every cultural space…the industry tracked trends…and fed them back into game content.[29]

It's clear, then, that technological innovations were not merely being treated as such but being purposefully manipulated into the taste culture of video game consumers.

Such was the state of AAA gaming contemporary to the beginning of the queer games avant-garde. Independent game developers needed to differentiate themselves from this technological overhaul with which they could not compete in terms of budget or labor power. I would argue that in order to achieve distinction from mainstream gaming titles, independent games developed by building cultural capital. Strategies for building cultural capital included developing a specifically "indie" aesthetic wrapped in the appreciation of pixel art and other "outdated' graphical styles, selling indie games as being mechanically or narratively novel, important, or superior to AAA games, and legitimizing independent games as culturally worthy in awards ceremonies, festivals, and journalistic year-end lists. All of these strategies appealed to a kind of bourgeois sensibility that made indie games stand out, but at the same time cemented a kind of indie attitude that continued to valorize certain kinds of developers over others. In practice, indie games had been explicitly defined in industrial usage using a two-part definition that parses two understandings of the word "independent." Writing for the video game trade

[29] Ibid, 73.

press *Gamasutra* in 2008, journalist Juan Gril argues in the case of independent games that "independent" can mean "independent funding," meaning that the game was self-funded by the developer, and "independent thought" which means that the developers' ideas were not mediated by a third party like a publisher. Gril, for his part, favors the latter and argues that indie games are first and foremost innovative. He writes that "An independent game is above all trying to innovate and provide a new experience for the player. It is not just filling a publisher's portfolio need. It has not been invented at a marketing department. And it has not been designed by a committee."[30] There is an explicit disavowal of publisher intervention here which is similar to Newman's definition of indie film. The sense here is that indie games are games that answer to nobody except the developer, and that they are a pure unfettered version of the original core idea for the game. It is at this level of creative authenticity that indie games often derive their cultural capital. As Jesper Juul succinctly writes in *Handmade Pixels* "independent games are continually presented as the authentic alternative to mainstream games—and to previous independent games—and that developers continue to strive to make new, truly authentic video games."[31]

The popular 2012 documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* makes this especially apparent. The film checks in with *Braid* creator Jonathan Blow and follows *Fez* creator Phil Fish, *Super Meat Boy* creators Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes through their development processes as they create some most influential indie games ever created. *Indie Game: The Movie* shares Gril's two-part definition. In the documentary, *Wired'*s Gus Mastrapa argues that "big games have other goals, they want to entertain you…indie games are frequently one person who says I

[30] Juan Gril, "The State of Indie Gaming," Gamasutra, April 30, 2008.

[31] Juul, *Handmade Pixels*, 6.

want a game to be like this, I want this game to be about one special thing."[32] So Indie Games are a direct extension of the artist's vision. Of *Braid,* Jonathan Blow says that "making it was about taking my deepest flaws and vulnerabilities and putting them in the game to see what happens." *Kill Screen's* Chris Dahlen argues that "independent games that any small team or individual makes to their own vision."[33] There is an underlying current of "if you have a vision, you can build a game." This discourse elevates indie games to a taste level above mass market shooters and toward a level of cultural capital marked by auteurism and distinction. They are posited as the pure creative expression of one developer's (or a small team of developers') vision, unfettered by the dumbed down mass appeal of mainstream games.

Another strategy utilized by the indie game community is the use of festivals and awards programs to legitimize independent games. The most notable example of this is the Independent Games Festival (IGF). The IGF is a festival event located at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco. Started in 1998, the event is known as an annual showcase for independently-produced interactive media. After independent developers submit to the festival, finalists are chosen and exhibited for a period of three days at the San Francisco conference. Because the Game Developers Conference is the largest congregation of game industry workers in the world, this provides an opportunity not only to showcase a game and win prizes but also to network with publishers and press to gain exposure. The IGF bills itself as the "Sundance for independent game developers" that empowers small teams through their awards, prizes, and

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[32] James Swirsky and Lisanne Pajot*, Indie Game: The Movie,* Documentary (BlinkWorks Media, 2012).

[33] Ibid.

exposure.[34] Whether or not this is the case, it is certainly, as other scholars have noted, the most visible event dedicated solely to independent games. The festival itself is in three parts: the festival pavilion, which runs for three days on the main conference floor and where every nominated game in the festival is exhibited and developers can get face time with audiences as well as publishers and distributors; the festival awards, where the games are awarded statues and prize money; and the independent games summit, where presenters from the industry give presentations on design, marketing, and other topics on independent game development. Crucially, the IGF as an institution identifies itself in myriad ways, not only as a prestigious event and a taste-making organization, but also as a development workshop and industry event where developers can market and sell their games. These functions all relate, however, to the ideological and industrial positioning of independent game production as a professional activity. This matches the process by which Bourdieu claims that certain works are legitimized in a cultural context. He writes, "the generalizing tendency is inscribed in the very principle of the disposition to *recognize legitimate works*, a propensity and capacity to recognize their legitimacy and perceive them as worthy of admiration in themselves."[35] The legitimization of independent games pushes them into the realm of cultural capital, and though technological novelty is certainly a consideration for many indie games the primary value of *indie* as a moniker is expressed at the level of culture.

It is tempting to assume that independent games rejection of the technological capital of mainstream gaming also is a rejection of the *culture* of mainstream gaming, but that is not

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[34] Independent Games Festival, "About the IGF," Independent Games Festival, August 23, 2016, https://igf.com/about-igf.

[35] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 26.

necessarily the case. Independent media can often reinforce the hegemonic norms of the culture from which it claims independence. Matthew Bannister notes in his study of 1980s indie guitar rock that the scene simply created a new metric for masculinity rather than dismantling the misogyny of rock music.[36] Although 80s indie circles rejected the "hard" masculinity of conventional rock machismo, they still policed identity through an adherence to a "punk" version of authenticity which was only afforded to masculinity. And this problem extends to indie games as well. Though indie gaming can sometimes mask the overt sexism and discrimination that often occurs in mainstream gaming spaces, the contingent nature of independent video game work and a built-in assumption of who cares about games often prioritizes men over women.[37] As Brendan Keogh writes, "in this intensely in/formal field of increased opportunities but drastically decreased structural support, the embodiment of specific social capitals is still very much privileged and is more likely to generate the legitimized habitus that stabilizes a gamemaker's disposition within the field."[38] In other words, due to a lack of institutional and material considerations for game developers, the expected habitus in the field of independent video game design still prioritizes the embodied experiences of straight white men.

It is no surprise then, that most of the canonized indie games were created by that same demographic. A cursory look at the winners of the Seamus McNally Grand Prize from the past 20 years reveals an incredible variety in terms of the genre and style of winning games.

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[36] Matthew Bannister, *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

[37] Mia Consalvo, "Crunched by Passion: Women Game Developers and Workplace Challenges.," in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, ed. Yasmin B. Kafai et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

[38] Brendan Keogh, "The Cultural Field of Video Game Production in Australia," *Games and Culture* 16, no. 1 (January 2021): 116–35, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019873746, 130.

Everything from the investigations of the full-motion video Her Story to the muted, pixelated, border-agent tedium of Papers Please. But an analysis of the teams or individuals that win the prize tell a different story. Every single team has a white man on it, and only two non-white men (Brendon Chung of *Quadrilateral Cowboy* and Derek Yu of *Aquaria*) and one (white) woman (Bethany Hockenberry of *Night in the Woods*) were among the winners. In fact, the relative success that some independent game developers experienced in smaller scale environments like IGF created its own kind of toxic masculinity in indie gaming spaces. Game developer and critic Liz Ryerson dubs this phenomenon "Indie Entitlement." For Ryerson, the more successful members of the Indie Games scene are characterized by a sense of entitlement that comes from the success of their games.[39] Though Simon Parkin of *The New Yorker* argues that this kind of entitlement is complicated by a sense of guilt from their success, and either the money or the fame that results from that accomplishment,[40] the case remains that the scene is full of men who were never socialized how to properly deal with success. Either way, that entitlement has led to blatant sexism in the Indie Game scene. Ryerson describes a moment at the Independent Games Festival in which *Hotline Miami* designer Cactus asks her for a blowjob Though he later apologized, this demonstrated to Ryerson that entitlement was a huge part of the Indie Game development scene. The real problem, she argued, was that "in a sphere of entitlement, people involved are not able to see how their actions reflect their privilege or adds to the oppression of the dominant culture around them, and only take criticisms to their behaviors as bitterness or

[39] Liz Ryerson, "Indie Entitlement," \\\\..........// (blog), June 20, 2014, http://ellaguro.blogspot.com/2014/06/indie-entitlement.html.

[40] Simon Parkin, "The Guilt of the Video-Game Millionaires," *The New Yorker,* April 3, 2014.

personal attacks."[41] The culture surrounding Indie Game development is not bereft of sexism, but actually embodies it in a unique way due to the sphere of entitlement that surrounds it.

This sphere of entitlement exists in no small part because the majority of indie game developers recognized in spaces like the IGF are men. Every person interviewed with the exception of Edmund McMillen's wife is a man, and all of them are white with the exception of *Kill Screen* editor Jamin Warren. Even the "DLC" that comes with the bonus version of the film is just more interviews with white men, save *Spelunky's* Derek Yu. This is no coincidence, but rather it represents a prolific problem in the gaming industry as a whole. This lack is not made explicit in the film, nor are issues of diversity ever mentioned. There are still some clues, however, that help explain both the actual reason for a lack of diversity and the ideological reason that is at the heart of the movie. The reasoning begins at the very beginning of the film. The twin voices of Warren and *Revision 3's* Anthony Carboni echo a similar idea: Indie Game developers are Indie Game developers because they are part of the first generation that grew up with games from a young age. Carboni even says "I feel an ownership of it. Games are mine."[42] The implication there is that games are not just something that you pick up. They are something you are born into. From stories of Fish creating *Cyber Vision* and McMillen drawing as children, to the common backdrop of Refenes' childhood bedroom, *Indie Game: The Movie* is constantly positing Indie Game development as something that draws from or returns to childhood. This statement in and of itself is not terribly problematic. When considering who has access to games growing up and what kind of games they have access to, however, the problems become more apparent. For that reason, we might think about in what ways queer games destabilize not only

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[41] Ryerson, "Indie Entitlement"

[42] Swirsky and Pajot, *Indie Game: the Movie*

the economic logics of mainstream gaming but its cultural logics as well, which may also be replicated in more established indie scenes.

Like the independent games scene, the queer games scene is defined more by a shared style, aesthetic sensibility toward games and informal networks of collaboration and distribution than it is by formalized genre categories. It arguably began in 2012 when current professor of practice at DePaul University Anna Anthropy released her groundbreaking game *Dys4ia*. First released on Newgrounds, *Dys4ia* chronicled Anthropy's struggles during and ultimate satisfaction with her experiences as a trans women at the start of her transition. The narrative unfolds through a series of microgames. *Dys4ia* won the IGF award for narrative storytelling. The same year, Anthropy published her book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, which advocated for the democratization of game development. She encouraged using simple tools such as Twine and GameMaker to make development easier and therefore get more kinds of stories told in video games, with less concern about the financial viability of said games. The next year, Canadian game developer and writer merritt k released *Lim*, a more subtle metaphor of the trans experience that used mechanics as a metaphor to tell the story of passing. These games kickstarted the "Queer Games Avant-Garde."

Something that is particular to queer indie game developers, I would argue, is the ways in which their embodied queer identities inform the look, feel, and development journeys of their games. For example, *Howling Dogs* designer Porpentine Charity Hartscape stresses the ways that her hormone therapy enriched and shaped her development progress. According to an interview with the *Village Voice*, "she wrote *Howling Dogs* in under a week soon after starting hormone therapy, in a friend's barn; by phone, she says the hormones leached into the work in a 'furnace-like process,' full of 'temperature shifts…feverish sweating and chills and reds and blues and

oranges flushing through your body. It's like when you're taking metal and tempering it into a different shape. It was a molten experience, and that sweat a lot into the work.'"[43] Similarly, *Dys4ia* composer Liz Ryerson explained:

> A lot of trans women grow up with games being socially acceptable, because they're raised as male. Then when they transition, they have to confront the fact that they are not part of this 'gamer' culture anymore. There's no space for them there, so now we have to create that space… Let's say I never had to 'accept' that I'm a trans person and therefore never became exposed to this incredible dissonance between what is actually happening in gamer culture and what my identity is. If I didn't have to confront that and try to extract something meaningful from that experience ... I would probably just be really into BioShock or whatever.[44]

For Ryerson, her lived experience as a trans woman shaped the way that she understood gaming culture precisely because of her outsider relationship to the traditionally masculine spaces of even independent games.

Queer developers ultimately seek alternative structures to the cultural capital of the independent games scene. They work within alternative systems of value and alternative paradigms for what is considered to be an innovative game. These systems can best be understood through the lens of subcultural capital, an extension of Bourdieu's work theorized by Sarah Thornton. In her discussion of British youth music cultures, Thornton creates a subcultural capital wherein small groups create an identity based on shared knowledges and ideals. For Thornton, "subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder."[45] Subcultural capital, like cultural capital, exists insofar as it is recognized by certain groups. One

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[43] Mallika Rao, "What Makes Art 'American' in 2017?," The Village Voice, March 15, 2017, https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/03/15/what-makes-art-american-in-2017/.

[44] Brendan Keogh, "Just Making Things and Being Alive about It: The Queer Games Scene," *Polygon* (blog), May 24, 2013, https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/5/24/4341042/the-queer-games-scene.

[45] Sarah Thornton, "Understanding Hipness: Subcultural Capital as a Feminst Tool," *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 100.

major difference, however, is that subcultural capital is related to a certain level of "hipness," that is, not simply a knowledge of culturally legitimate works, but a demonstrated understanding of what cultural activities carry a certain clout within designated subcultures. As Thornton puts it, "subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being 'in the know.'"[46] We might say that sub-cultural capital is a more specific form of cultural capital. Even without the resources of more established indie developers, then, queer developers can create an alternative framework of value that is predicated on alternative forms of hipness.

If indie games are about cultural capital and authentic innovation, then queer independent games are about personal freedom of development and personal expression. In his 2014 IndieCade East keynote speech, QWOP developer Bennett Foddy defined what he saw as indie, a wide-ranging term referring to a variety of "small, scrappy teams, individuals, making stuff fast, self-publishing, and sticking it to the man."[47] In an attempt to take the term back from developers like McMillen who scoffed at the democratization of game making, he said "the biggest upside of being indie is that there are no creative limits, there's experimentation, there are personal games, there are weird games."[48] The impetus of queer independent development, then, is not making distinctive, critically-successful games, but rather deeply personal ones. The games that are rewarded in this community are not those which display the most graphical fidelity or technical prowess, but those which portray moving personal narratives or resonate with other queer players.

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Bennett Foddy, "The State of the Union," *IndieCade*, Youtube Video, February 25, 2014.

[48] Ibid.

Cultural capital in the independent games scene is based on a specific value system that purposefully circumvents the explicitly economic motivations of the AAA industry. Similarly, subcultural capital in the queer games scene is, to borrow Atton's term, related to the deprofessionalization of game development. Importantly, many queer independent video game developers are still economically minded, insofar as they make money from their games, even though they are much more likely to release their games for free. Thornton notes that "the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly in what it dislikes and what it emphatically is not,"[49] and queer games are most emphatically not typical independent games. In a scathing burn on *Indie Game: the Movie*, Anna Anthropy jokes that the independent video game scene as expressed in the film is "just white guys re-making Mario."[50] Just as Michael Newman describes independent films as "not only a set of industrial criteria or formal or stylistic conventions" but also "most centrally a cluster of interpretive strategies,"[51] the queer gaming community can be understood as a subculture that is organized around shared values and ideas that began as an *alternative* to large publishers but have now organized themselves as *against* them.

These differences exemplify the distinction between the two scenes as a whole. If we were to develop a set of interpretive strategies for thinking about queer independent games as a subculture we could use the lessons learned from itch.io as a starting point. Every aspect of any type of game development is to some extent in service of the types of capital those communities are invested in. AAA games can have long development cycles in order to perfect graphical representations and create large open worlds because they have large budgets. Indie games, on

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[49] Thornton, 105.

[50] Ryerson, "Indie Entitlement."

[51] Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 11.

the other hand, generally have short development cycles so that the creators can iterate and innovate on their ideas and designs and gain subcultural capital.

Crucially, subcultural capital is a space not only for the creation of alternative systems of taste and value, but also for the de-stratification of identity and the ability to work outside of one's own perceived social status. Thornton argues that "subcultural capital is the linchpin of an alternative hierarchy in which the axes of age, gender, sexuality and race are all employed in order to keep the determinations of class, income and occupation at bay."[52] Thus, marginalized video game developers can use their subculture as a free space to explore personal issues of identity. Queer developers, for instance, have often found refuge in the independent games scene to explore issues of the body, of gender, and of sexuality. These explorations often run counter to the AAA goal of representing bodies to the fullest fidelity possible. Rather, queer designers often undertake alternative formulation of the body in their game by reimagining gameplay and representation. Similarly, queer developers often utilize alternative production and distribution schemes that seem to run counter to the AAA cash-first mode of distribution. Instead, often through freeness, queer developers open space for alternative forms of value in the distribution of video game commodities.

In the following section I will explore three developers use of innovative gameplay in the independent scene to critically explore queerness. Understanding the body's relationship to gameplay is crucial to understanding not only queer games. As Martti Lahti notes, we can understand video games as a "paradigmatic site for producing, imagining, and testing different

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[52] Thonton, 105.

kinds of relations between the body and technology in contemporary culture."[53] Video games create a new corporeal experience through the physicality of play. Queer developers' antihegemonic use of play and mechanics to express queerness, as well as the latent queerness often found even unintentionally in gameplay, have been well documented.[54] But often, for queer games, the resistance to hegemonic norms in gaming culture often begins before the game is even played. It is useful, then, to think through the ways that game development and distribution can also push past hegemonic norms. In many cases, as I will show, it is by reconfiguring established values through free distribution.

Porpentine is a game developer who makes adventure and experimental games in the text-based engine Twine. Her games often deal with bodily dysphoria, cybernetic enhancements, and slime. Working completely in text allows her to create games without the confines of representation that is mediated by graphics. Rather than relying on high-quality graphics engines to render her complex imagery, Porpentine is able to use text. In the early to mid-2010s, Twine became an increasingly popular software for creating and developing games. Since the output of Twine was simple HTML and CSS files, there became a challenge in where to host the games. While some larger creators used their own websites or game hosting platforms like itch.io, that option wasn't as easily available for amateur designers and smaller creators.

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[53] Martti Lahti, "As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games," *The Video Game Theory Reader,* ed. Mark J. P. Wolf & Bernard Perron, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 158.

[54] See, among others: Bo Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LBGTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); Naomi Clark, "What Is Queerness in Games Anyway?," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

Enter philomel.la. Philome.la was a free hosting platform for Twine games where users could upload games to the site via their Twitter accounts. It was first put online in early 2013, and put into read-only mode on September 30, 2019, effectively turning it into an archive instead of an active platform. Although we don't know exactly how many games were hosted on Twine, we do know that the number of files hosted on the site runs into the tens of thousands.[55] Porpentine herself had a role in the creation of the platform. As the platform's creator Colin Marc put it, "the idea came out of a conversation I had with Porpentine when I met her, I think. And then I threw it together in an afternoon with my friend Trucy contributing the design. And then I really didn't touch it for years."[56] Despite this rather noncommittal telling of the creation of the platform, philome.la remained a crucial component of the free game ecosystem in the 2010s.

Platforms like philome.la are crucial to both the history of free games and the history of queer independent games. From early 2013 until its closure, the site served as the only reliable free hosting platform for Twine and hypertext fiction generally. This meant that with a single click thousands of users could upload their stories without having to create new accounts or set up hosting, and they could share the story with others. This site added to a constellation of increasingly decentralized options for hosting games, and also served as an archive and repository for a medium that many queer developers used to help tell their stories. To this day, as Daniel Cox argues, "as a free service used by many across different countries and backgrounds,

[55] Daniel Cox, "Static Echoes: Exploring the Life and Closing of the Free Twine Hosting Service, Philome.La" (electronic literature organization, Orlando, FL, 2020).

[56] Ibid.

it is also remains the only public and free access to a variety of Twine projects made by both professionals and amateurs alike of its kind outside of commercial platforms."[57]

But websites like philomel.la are not Porpentine's only contribution to the history and practice of free game distribution. Her development and collaboration process also challenge the secretive and closed nature of larger development in both AAA and indie spaces. In particular, her willingness to share her development strategies with other creators and work openly with them was directly informed by the free distribution of her games. Cara Ellison notes that "Porpentine's transparency in her working methods, openness about her inspirations and the help she has received are dramatically different from the working practices of high budget commercial works."[58] In part this was due to an intensely productive development cycle, where Porpentine released dozens of games a year in the first half of the 2010s. But it was also due to her collaboration process. Quoting Daphny David on the queer Twine scene occupied by Porpentine and Anthropy among others, Ellson writes "everyone's telling everyone what tools they're using and building each other up instead of hiding 'trade secrets'…There's no profit to be made, so theres no 'product' to protect. It's a really big fucking orgy of creativity and Porp and Anna are making it flow."[59] There is also something about Porpentine's laissez-faire attitude toward distribution and the commodities that feel queer. Just as her games explore and venerate trash, refuse, and forgotten objects, she almost treats the games themselves that way. Joshua T. Morrison argues that queer and trans folks create alternative systems of cultural capital through

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Cara Ellison, "Hypersexed Hypertext: Porpentine and the Twine Text Game Revolution," *PC Gamer*, April 3, 2013, https://www.pcgamer.com/hypersexed-hypertext-porpentine-and-the-twine-text-game-revolution/.

[59] Ibid.

the creation, distribution, and consumption of media that is considered to be "useless."[60] In the same way, we might understand Porpentine's strategies for game distribution as an extension of her queer politics and a reorientation of value vis-à-vis free games. Just as indie has come to describe an aesthetic as well as an economic approach toward filmmaking, the queer sensibility toward game-making affects not only the games themselves but also the distribution and development cycle. We can see how the collaborative nature of Porpentine's projects, and the public nature by which she displays them, fit into a "games as murals" sensibility.

One example of where this different attitude toward distribution and the text of the game coalesce is Porpentine's free game *How to Speak Atlantean* explores her conception of the body through the lens of trans and cyber-feminist politics. In the game, the player works to reconstruct their body, which consists of giant walls of text with numbered sets of body parts—6 eyes, 12 arms, 24 sets of genitals, and uninterrupted skin, among other sets. Porpentine describes the game as one which "explores my conflict-blasted body as a series of enormous mechanical zones followed by scavenging a hideous trashscape for spare parts to repair my broken Hitachi and cum my brains out."[61] The game occupies a personal narrative for her wherein the game's body can be understood to have a relationship to her real-life body. Porpentine says of her games that "my games come from my body. The limitations and strengths. The games I was "supposed" to be making were alienating and exhausting me. Complete games. Games from existing molds,

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[60] Joshua T. Morrison, "Reveling in Uselessness: Queer and Trans Media, Consumptive Labour, and Cultural Capital" (Dissertation, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan, 2019).

[61] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London :New York: Routledge, 2000), 291–324, 291.

whether those molds are mainstream or obscure. There's always pressure to harden and solidify. My games are broken. And that's okay."[62]

The relationship between the body and technology in Porpentine's work can be understood through the lens of Donna Harraway's conception of the cyborg. As she writes in "A Cyborg Manifesto," "A Cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction." Gamers are the utmost example of the postmodern cyborg, literally experiencing a physical connection to the digital game. Such a connection creates a practical link between digital media and the body. But Porpentine takes this connection one step further. In *How to Speak Atlantean*, the player-character's body is literally a cyborg, combining text, technology, and space. The game ends up being a large metaphor for Porpentine's complicated relationship with self-pleasure—it is a quest to fix her broken Hitachi magic wand (a sex toy). In the game, Porpentine writes that she favors the Hitachi because "I like that it decentralizes genitalia in favor of a vibrating hub. I like that staying hard or getting wet don't matter. No pressure, just raw, sustaining machine power. And it feels amazing." Despite the limitations of a platform like Twine, which is primarily text only, Porpentine is able to communicate complicated ideas surrounding representation. And the ability to easily share a game on Twitter through philome.la further democratizes the experience without the need to go through cumbersome approval processes. We might say that Twine provides freedom from the rigid structures of video game distribution at the time.

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[62] Tim Williams, "An Interview with Porpentine, Maker of Mutant Feminist Cyber Games," *The Hairpin*, January 17, 2014, https://thehairpin.com/an-interview-with-porpentine-maker-of-mutant-feminist-cyber-games-6add84226e8d.

Like Porpentine, Stephen Lavelle prioritizes quantity when making games. He has released over 400 games since 2004, the vast majority of which were released for free and hosted on his website. In fact, Lavelle, who also uses the pseudonym "increpare," won the world record for "most prolific independent game developer" in 2016.[63] These games are extremely short, for the most part. But the fast and free release schedule of the games allows Lavelle to iterate and work through gameplay ideas and receive feedback. In an interview with IndieGames.com's Mike Rose, Lavelle said "the idea of making freeware games is pretty important to me. It's not something that I would really consider giving up unless it was something absolutely fantastic, like I had an idea for a game that would absolutely require distribution channels to exist at all."[64] For Lavelle, the ability to release games very quickly and get feedback immediately, as well as the freedom to not be beholden to any specific distribution channels other than his own. Instead, Lavelle relies on a donate button for any money that he receives for these games. Lavelle also expressed that distributing on his own website gave him a feeling of control over his art, especially in regard to the sexuality of his games. He said,

> I sort of like the idea of games as being cohesive wholes and to have it sort of stand by itself. So this is why I generally wouldn't put screenshots up or wouldn't describe them and why I wouldn't usually release the sound track separately or anything like that. I just say I'm trying to make something that's a game that's sort of a single thing. So I'll try and make the single thing. I'll put it up on my website as a single thing that you can play if you want to.[65]

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[63] Guinness World Records, "Most Prolific Independent Game Developer," Guinness World Records, December 31, 2014, https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/most-prolific-independent-game-developer.

[64] Mike Rose, "The IndieGames.Com Podcast," n.d., https://archive.org/details/IndieGamesPodcast/1+Stephen+Lavelle+(increpare).mp3.

[65] Ibid.

For Lavelle, free distribution of his games allows him to have total control not only over the pace of game release and the content, but also over the traditional accoutrement that sites like Steam require: descriptions, tags, reviews, and so on. By sidestepping the traditional online distribution platforms, Lavelle is able to reveal exactly as much as he wants about the nature and story of his games.

It also allows him to make games that are more personal. Many of his games have themes and content that are about his life in particular, and Lavelle doesn't have to worry about whether that will resonate with a particular audience. The result is what game critic Cara Ellison calls "vignettes of potent and distilled humanity, stored in a feeble little container on your desktop. Their purity and vulnerability is striking."[66] This vignette-based approach to game making has resulted in cultural capital for Lavelle, such as his 2012 game *English Country Tune* earning an IGF nomination for Excellence in Design. His approach has also created a community of like-minded gamers in his comments who feel a genuine connection to the artist. Under more intense games, many commenters ask Lavelle if he is ok. As Ellison tells it, "His last few games have, in particular, made people wonder if something is up. Under one called The Shadow, someone left the comment: 'I hope the flower doesn't say much about the soil.'"[67] Lavelle's free distribution is important not only because of the creativity it enables but also because it contributes to a communal sense of gaming that is characteristic of queer spaces in the early 2010s. By retaining control over the distribution of his games, Lavelle has traded the economic value presented by platforms like Steam for the cultural and subcultural value in the community he helps maintain.

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[66] Cara Ellison, "Increpare: The Genius Developer Who Gives His Games Away for Free," *The Guardian*, April 2, 2015, sec. Games, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/apr/02/increpare-the-genius-developer-who-gives-his-games-away-for-free.

[67] Ibid.

Lavelle's game *Slave of God* is a phenomenological representation of being in a club, but rather than being an attempt to represent a club space via photorealistic imagery that one might achieve through a AAA-engine, he uses abstract lights and sounds and Haring-esque stick figures to emulate a club. By relying on the queer mechanic of non-representational spaces and approximations of atmosphere, Lavelle moves the conversation away from detailed accuracy of the human body and towards an evocation of the intangible experience of going to the club. This choice affirms the value of digital space in providing an alternative to real-world space and also delivers, through abstraction, a world where gender is freeform and subjective. Thus, Slave of God both achieves and queers the aesthetics of sensation and discovery through its abstracted landscape.

In *Abstract Bodies*, David J. Getsy argues that abstraction is an avenue through which queerness can be realized artistically. He writes, "the abstract…does nothing less than offer an analogous visualization of the challenge to the norms that govern humanness."[68] Abstraction breaks norms and in doing so contests artistic and social convention. The abstraction of bodies specifically confronts anxieties regarding the precariousness of human gender constructs. "the unorthodox body—in its unrecognizability—can disrupt the finality of that assignment of gender and humanity. When the abstract body is reduced to normative linguistic assignments of personhood via dimorphic gender, the results are unsatisfying, aphasic, and scotomatous."[69] Lavelle's abstraction of the club scene in *Slave of God*, including the abstraction of the bodies of the clubgoers, likewise challenges gender dichotomies.

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[68] David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 91–93.

[69] Ibid., 93.

It is the replication of the emotion of the ecstasy of a club experience through gameplay which allows Slave of God to act as a queer game. While it is easy to interpret the game's flashing, colorful lights and intense soundtrack as being representative of experiencing a club while on MDMA, I would eschew that interpretation in favor of one that accepts that the game is at least partially signifying the emotive experience of ecstasy. José Muñoz sees ecstasy as the knowledge of a temporal unity which "contains the potential to help us encounter a queer temporality, a thing that is not the linearity that many of us have been calling straight time."[70] Slave of God's ambiguous temporal states (including the slowing-down and speeding-up of time and the ambiguity of the length of time spent within the game state), as well as its move towards experience rather than representation, fit squarely within this ecstatic temporality.

Slave of God disrupts traditional phenomenologies through mechanics as theorized by k in a way which defies traditional models of physical attraction. One "challenge" in the game is to dance with another character for a period of time until you've experienced a significant level of attraction. But instead of making this process a straightforward model of pressing buttons in time with music as is customary in many dance games, Lavelle uses first-person mechanics to lead the player-character around in an awkward game of cat and mouse in a way that is evocative of the awkwardness of actually dancing with someone at a club. It also posits attraction as a more circular, meandering phenomenon than is traditionally dealt with in games. These kind of attraction mechanics mirror what Sara Ahmed in Queer Phenomenology calls "directionality;" if sexual orientation is something that one "is," then what one "is" is oriented towards romantic

[70] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 186.

interests in a specific direction. Ahmed's analysis makes explicit a physicality of sexual orientation which is often buried under the surface. For straight people, attraction is perceived as having a linear, "straight" directionality to it. Attraction follows a heterosexual matrix which is invested in the division of labor and the production of capital. The same cannot be said for perceptions of queer attraction. This perception is exemplified by sexologist Havelock Ellis, who calls homosexuality an "inversion" towards the inner self and also demarcates it as "off-line."[71] *Slave of God*, then, subverts this understanding of sexual orientation through its mechanics by making all attraction a kind of complicated disarray. The free nature of Lavelle's distribution, and the personal nature through which he creates games while sharing them openly with his community illustrates how developers might take a "games as gifts" approach, even if the gift is for a whole group of people

While Stephen Lavelle uses his own personal website to launch as many games as possible, Robert Yang, designer of games such as *The Tearoom, Cobra Club,* and *Radiator* 2 uses itch.io to distribute his games. We can contrast itch.io with Steam to illustrate how the former may operate more in-line with the goals of queer game developers like Yang. Steam, a product offered by the Valve Corporation (*Half-Life, Portal, Team Fortress,* etc.), is the largest digital games distribution platform in the world. As of December 2016, there were over 11,000 games distributed on Steam, with nearly 40% of those games being released in 2016.[72] Theoretically, any video game developer could have released a game on Steam in 2016. Many independent developers have games on the platform, and Steam lets anyone submit a game. In practice, however, the process ended up being far more opaque and byzantine. Game creators were asked

[71] Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 70.

[72] Luke Plunkett, "Nearly 40% of All Steam Games Were Released in 2016," *Kotaku,* November 30, 2016.

to put their games on Steam Greenlight, a service where users could vote for games that seem interesting, and eventually they may show up for sale. While this process seemed democratic, there were actually several gatekeeping functions which limit the games which actually show up on Steam. Firstly, there was a $100 fee for all new accounts in order to use the service, which means if developers don't have $100, their games will never be on the platform. While Steam argued that this policy is put in place to "keep spam and joke submissions out of the system,"[73] the fee had added detriment of limiting the amount of content that can even be eligible for greenlighting. This also made Steam a very inefficient platform for releasing free games. Though Steam is now much more amenable to hosting any game, that was not always the case. And the drawn-out approval process of Greenlight meant that it would only be useful to release large games that studios had worked on for years, rather than the very quick, small-scale production cycle that Porpentine, Lavelle, and Yang utilized.

Once in the system, games went through an additional vetting process from the team at Valve. "We try to incorporate external factors such as awards, critical acclaim, significant Kickstarter success, press coverage, etc," Valve's Vice President of Marketing Doug Lombardi told gaming news website Kotaku. "At the end of the day, we're trying to prioritize the games that customers are most interested in having on Steam. The goal is to keep refining the process to get better and better at making sure games customers want are available and discoverable on Steam."[74] In other words, Valve prioritized games which are likely to be commercially or critically successful, which itself becomes probable if it is being hand-picked by a large platform. At the time, Steam is invested in the economies of scale that also produced some of the biggest

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[73] Steam Greenlight, "Frequently Asked Questions," *Steam,* 2016.

[74] Nathan Grayson, "Inside the Murky Process of Getting Games on Steam," *Kotaku*, March 10, 2016.

indie hits like *Minecraft* and *Stardew Valley,* which made it harder for smaller games to break through. Though Steam ultimately scrapped the Greenlight project in 2020, it had a huge impact on the landscape of digital distribution for independent games at a time when the demise of Flash meant it was harder to release games online for free.

The team at itch.io, on the other hand, has a different philosophy when it comes to choosing which games can be distributed on their platform. The site, which began in 2013, has become a space where a variety of independent developers can release their games for purchase with no middleman. There are approximately 50,000 games released on the platform, precisely because the distributor has very few rules as to what kinds of games can be distributed in itch.io. The site's founder Leaf Corcoran blogged that he wanted to create a platform where independent designers would be able to upload their games quickly, freely, and without having to wait behind taste engines like Steam Greenlight. In a 2013 post he wrote,

> I've seen a few other indie game marketplace sites but I've been disappointed in them because there is just too much crap on the game pages. Big logos for the marketplace instead of the game, distractions like comments and ratings forced on the game pages, and just poor user experience. I tried to make something clean and focused. The page you create is just about your game. There's no itch.io branding anywhere, no ads, just your game. Then there are sites like Steam which are great distribution platforms but impossible for anyone to just starting using right away. itch.io is free for anyone to start using right away. You can go upload your game now![75]

Rather than emphasizing games that can sell, Corcoran opened the floodgates to allow all variety of content on his platform. The site brands itself as "a collection of some of the most unique,

[75] Leaf Corcoran, "Introducing itch.io," *Leafo,* March 3, 2016.

interesting, and independent creations you'll find on the web."[76] In other words, where Steam sells a smaller number of games and advertises profitability, itch.io sells a larger number of games but advertises uniqueness and expression. These link to the fundamental differences of capital between the AAA development scene and the independent scene. The choice to sell on itch.io instead of Steam becomes a choice that reinforces the designer's attitude toward game distribution and independence. Itch.io also has fewer DRM and platform-specific requirements than Steam does. The subject matter of Yang's games also played a role in his choice of platform. His explicitly sexual games were not allowed on Steam or Twitch. In response, he changed his design of his cruising game *The Tearoom* to criticize the platforms' policies, though he still only released it on itch.io. In an interview with Bo Ruberg, he said

> I also want to be in dialogue with the fact that my games have been banned from Twitch for having sexual content. If I put dicks in the game, it will definitely get banned. So instead the characters are going to have guns sticking out of their pants. I'm trying to make a point about how guns are apparently OK in video games but sex isn't. It's also about how guns are idolized in video game graphics. These are going to be very lovingly rendered guns that you lick.[77]

Here, Yang includes commentary on Twitch's policy on sexuality not only through his words but by creating realistic models of guns. He is creating bespoke models specifically as criticism.

Beginning in 2014, Yang designed a triptych of games entitled *Radiator 2* which ask the question "what if industrial AAA game technology was used for good instead of evil?" Yang's games reappropriate the powerful engines and graphical capabilities of large budget games for purposes other than shooting enemies and tipping strippers. It changes these structures into something that resist the violence and problematic sexuality they were originally used for. Anna

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[76] The itch.io team, "About itch.io," *itch.io,* 2024.

[77] Ruberg, *Queer Games Avant-Garde*, 50.

Anthropy acknowledges the subversion of power structures that is possible through the utilization of large game engines through an analysis of one of Yang's earlier games, *Radiator 1*, noting that this kind of strategy opens opportunities to use recognizable mechanics and graphics in new and destabilizing ways.[78] In contrast to Lavelle, Yang often spends months to years working on one game, modeling assets to be as detailed as possible, utilizing novel controllers and peripheral technologies, and pushing boundaries in what simpler engines what unity are capable of. In *Radiator 2*'s subgames, *Hurt Me Plenty*, *Stick Shift*, and *Succulent*, Yang pushes this idea even further.

Hurt Me Plenty is a game that utilizes AAA-quality photorealistic character models and extensive physics modeling to play out a scene where the player-character negotiates a sexual encounter with a man in his underwear. The two agree on boundaries for the encounter, including a safe word. The player is then given free range to spank the man as much as they choose. What isn't apparent right away, however, is that if they ignore the man's wishes or the safe word, the player is eventually locked out of the game. *Hurt Me Plenty* uses mechanics to teach players about healthy interplay in dominant/submissive relationships. An added appropriation of AAA technology is Yang's use of the LeapMotion, a motion-capture device which allows the player to use their hand as a controller. This addition furthers the focus on and exploration of queer subject matter through sophisticated technology.

Stick Shift expands on this trend. In the game, one plays as a character who is driving and ultimately seeks to pleasure a "gay car." According to Yang:

This short game, along with its sister games *Hurt Me Plenty* and *Succulent*, tries to

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[78] Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 85.

> expand eroticism in games beyond a cutscene. What if sex in games was something we did, instead of something we obtained? One way to do sex is to see sex everywhere. Sex here, sex there, sex behind yonder tree!... and sex through the tender caresses that seduce gay cars everywhere.[79]

In this discussion, the designer is critical of the sex-as-reward model often seen in AAA titles. Mechanics make the magic in this game so to speak, and Stick Shift uses its mechanics to make the physicality of intimacy read on a more authentic level than watching it in a cutscene. *Hurt me Plenty* also trades in the same idea that performance is key to the mechanical authenticity of sex in gameplay. To play the game, the player can utilize a LeapMotion controller to capture spanking motion by the player's hand. Thus, instead of pressing a button to spank the beefcake, the player makes the physical gesture of spanking to enact the mechanic. Because the player actually moves their body in this way, their body is more integrated into the platform. This is true on the level of the technology as well. A LeapMotion controller works by using a camera to obtain a set of images of the player's hand, which are then converted into planes or slices which can be remodeled into a 3d object on the computer, and then further refined.[80] This process is repeated until there is not object to replicate (the player has removed their hand). In essence, the 3d object used by the LeapMotion is not an abstract representation of a hand. It is a graphical reconstruction of the exact hand that is completing the motions. The player's body is not just another hardware component of the platform. It is being actively reconstructed into the space of the software, and thus the gesture being performed intimately connected with the image onscreen.

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[79] Robert Yang. "Stick Shift." *Radiator Blog*, 2015.

[80] David Holz, Motion capture using cross-sections of an object, US20130182079A1, filed March 17, 2012, and issued July 18, 2013.

For Muñoz, the performance of gesture is one method of approaching queer utopia. "Gestures," he argues, "transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture."[81] The visual lexicon of gesture, especially gestures coded as queer, is able to convey a lot of information regarding and fits into a larger queer history of performance. The gesture of *Hurt Me Plenty* offers a similar possibility. By orienting the player within a community and a history of queer kink subcultures via the gesture of spanking, Yang communicates a great deal regarding the importance of consent and the value of communication in BDSM activities. This is a gesture that would not be possible without the appropriation of the LeapMotion controller.

It can be inferred that LeapMotion did not intend for their product to be used like this. In fact, the initial design of the LeapMotion's motion capture was oriented towards business use. The patent for the method of 3d motion capture which LeapMotion invented considers a general use case: "a user can perform hand gestures that are analyzed using mocap program, and the results of this analysis can be interpreted as an instruction to some other program…by way of illustration, a user might be able to use upward or downward Swiping gestures to scroll a webpage."[82] Indeed, before it was taken up as a possible virtual reality controller, the LeapMotion was first marketed as a productivity technology. But often queer play is not about using things the way they were meant to be designed. In fact, it is about re-appropriating seemingly politically-drained technologies as a way to point toward queerness on the peripheries, or queerness on the horizon.

Finally, *Succulent* is a small game where the player controls the arm of a "beefcake" who

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[81] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 67.

[82] Holz, "Motion Capture."

spends most of the game sucking on a flesh-colored food item. In the background are two similar underwear-clad models who grab their crotches seductively. Eventually once the player has let the beefcake finish the food, he becomes demonic and attempts to devour the player. Yang again uses realistic modeling as well as complicated physics modeling—noting that "inverse kinematics was finally good for something"[83]—though instead of using these mechanics to model something like holding a gun in a first person shooter, he uses them to model faux oral sex. The game itself satirizes the use of extremely similar 3D-models (a practice of many large games) to make an argument about the state of the gay community at large. In many ways, *Succulent* is taking a stab at the hyper-masculinized and exceedingly curated culture perpetuated in gay dating circles and on apps like Grindr, as well as paying homage to alternative forms of queer discourse (its imagery is purposefully reminiscent of queer hip-hop artists like Cazwell and Le1f who use glistening and muscular male bodies as props in a similar way that female bodies are often used as props in heteropatriarchal hip-hop videos).

In *The Tearoom*, Yang focuses his desire to appropriate AAA technologies on a place. In the game he recreates a mid-century bar bathroom, complete with meticulously handcrafted urinals. "I want to highlight the absurdity of AAA toilets, which rarely ever matter in AAA games, yet they invest all these resources in it as an incidental detail to show-off their production resources," Yang said in an interview with Kotaku's Patricia Hernandez, "I'm basically making a game that somewhat matches the contemporary AAA prestige production standard for interactive toilets, but I'm also taking them up on their implicit 'ridiculous' dare, to actually make a game where the toilet matters."[84] But these toilets don't only matter because Yang put so

[83] Ibid.

[84] Patricia Hernandez, "Erotic Video Game Will Let Players Get Sexy in The Bathroom," *Kotaku,* October 12, 2016.

much labor into their creation. *The Tearoom* is a game about cruising, making explicit the cultural significance of public restrooms as a space for queer sexual expression in the middle of the 20th century (and continuing today in different forms). Yang is utilizing AAA production values (though on a smaller scale as he is an independent developer) to tell stories that big-budget games wouldn't or couldn't tell. Because independent games draw subcultural capital from telling the stories of disenfranchised or marginalized groups, he is put in a space where he can make those kinds of games. The specificity with which Yang creates his games, the artisanal work that he puts into them—tailoring them to his own sensibilities—as well as his practice of putting out relatively few games demonstrates a "games as couture" mentality for distribution.

Conclusion

Several queer games utilize indie game spaces' subcultural capital to interrogate issues of queerness and the body. In *How to Speak Atlantean*, Porpentine uses the text adventure software twine to create a game that blurs the line between bodies and technology and becomes untimely in order to look towards the future of feminism. Stephen Lavelle's *Slave of God* uses abstraction to complicate the gender binary and create a phenomenologically different conception of club spaces that can be used to reconceive of sexual orientation. Finally, in *Radiator 2* and *The Tearoom* Robert Yang satirically replicated the AAA obsession with technology to explore gay men's spaces, sexuality, and issues of consent. All of the developers engage with indie subcultural capital to innovate on gameplay.

In some ways, a platform like Patreon would be best equipped to achieve the kind of relationship between the game commodity and labor that many queer developers seemed to be

interested in the early to mid 2010s. Patreon allows fans who believe in the developer's vision to support their work while the developer is still able to release their games for free. While crowdfunding and patronage are not always immediately available to many creators, they do provide alternative structures to both professional game distribution and also digital platforms like Steam. Sites like philomel.la have shut down, and it is increasingly uncommon for developers to have the resources or the predilection toward hosting their games on their own sites like Porpentine and Lavelle. Nevertheless, what can we learn from the free distribution and development practice of queer developers? As game audiences continue to grow and more and more spaces open up for the enjoyment and consumption of video games, developers will want to continue making games that tell personal stories. Free distribution strategies in particular have the added benefit of developers being able to take more control over how their games are distributed and where and what kind of value is generated. I have taken the first in what I hope are many steps in unpacking the usefulness of games in telling queer stories, and in developing the strategies and conventions of queer gameplay. Moreover, in thinking about independent games as a whole I want to move past the notion that the indie development scene should only be read as one that is outside of AAA publishers. Rather, this scene has a set of subcultural values and practices which should be acknowledged and categorized. By understanding the way that indie games create subcultural capital we can move into new and creative ways to think about video games moving forward.

Chapter 5—Flapping Too Close to the Sun: Creative Labor, Value, and the Racialization of App Development in *Flappy Bird*

Flappy Bird is a free game released in May of 2013 for mobile platform by Vietnamese designer Dong Nguyen under his studio dotGEARS. But it wasn't until December of the same year that the game began to gain any sort of popularity. It is hard to overstate the distaste with which American and British gaming press eviscerated *Flappy Bird* upon its rise to the top of the app store charts in late January 2014. Early reviews from mobile-specific blogs lauded the game. But gaming journalists from large publications struggled to explain the popularity of a game in which they could not find any redeeming characteristics. These very early reviews ranged from *Buzzfeed* calling the game "terrible, crappy, and soulless,"[1] *Kotaku* dismissing it as "sloppy, frustratingly difficult, and covered with in-game ads,"[2] and *CNET* deeming it "shamelessly manipulative."[3] In its review of Nguyen's game, *USG* described it as "addictive and compulsive in the same way that popping bubble wrap is addictive and compulsive" but gave it "half a star for at least having the decency to not have any microtransactions."[4] The *Guardian* claimed that the experience of playing *Flappy Bird* "makes you want to climb up a tree and kick over a nest."[5]

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[1]Joseph Bernstein, "Why On Earth Is This Borderline Crappy, Impossibly Hard Game The Most Popular Download On The App Store?," *BuzzFeed News* (blog), January 23, 2014, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/josephbernstein/why-on-earth-is-this-borderline-crappy-impossibly-hard-game.

[2] Mike Fahey, "The Most Popular App On iTunes Is An Impossible, Ad-Riddled Mess," *Kotaku* (blog), January 24, 2014, https://kotaku.com/the-most-popular-app-on-itunes-is-an-impossible-ad-rid-1508171485.

[3] Nick Stratt, "Flappy Bird Is the Embodiment of Our Descent into Madness," *CNET* (blog), February 2, 2014, https://www.cnet.com/tech/mobile/flappy-bird-is-the-embodiment-of-our-descent-into-madness/.

[4] Pete Davison, "Flappy Bird iOS Review: 18 Million Players Can't Be Wrong, Right?," *USgamer* (blog), February 3, 2014, https://www.usgamer.net/articles/flappy-bird-ios-review-18-million-players-cant-be-wrong-right.

[5] Stuart Heritage, "Flappy Bird Is Not the New Angry Birds – It's Pure Rage," *The Guardian*, February 5, 2014, sec. Games, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/shortcuts/2014/feb/05/flappy-bird-new-angry-birds-makes-rage-apps.

Games journalists, it appeared, were pulling no punches in their description of *Flappy Bird* as a game unworthy of the success it experienced and the money the advertisements generated for its designer.

After the initial outcry, the more sustained journalistic investigations into *Flappy Bird* attempted to in some way explain its massive popularity and understand its development. Nguyen's reserved nature and his tendency not to talk to the press left little other than his Twitter in terms of his response to his success. Yet from the very beginning of the press cycle, nearly every single article names Nguyen as the developer and publisher of the game, neglecting to mention that he both publishes and develops under the dotGEARS studio name. Beginning with *Buzzfeed*'s early review on January 23rd titled "Why On Earth Is This Borderline Crappy, Impossibly Hard Game The Most Popular Download On The App Store?" in which he refers to Nguyen as "an apparently sincere developer from Hanoi,"[6] each author almost without fail seemed to mention that Nguyen was Vietnamese. More than four in five of the over 50 articles that I read for this chapter state it outright, and in most of the rest it can be inferred from his surname. Rarely did any of them use the studio name. We might say that the consistent mention of Nguyen's nationality and the refusal to recognize him as a professional developer with a studio were not coincidentally attached to reviews that questioned the quality and legitimacy of his game, as if his status as a designer from a developing nation was additional evidence of the game's poor craftsmanship. But whatever the case, it became clear that Nguyen's Vietnamese identity was linked to his status as a developer and the nature of the game. This trend in the press around *Flappy Bird* at the time lead writers like *The Daily Dot*'s Aja Romano to ask "Did racism

[6] Bernstein, "Why On Earth."

in gaming culture drive *Flappy Bird* offline?"[7] I think that racism was certainly part of it. The conversation around *Flappy Bird* in some ways feels like a question of East vs West. I think the reality is a bit more complicated. Video game development as an industry has a long history of cross-cultural exchange between the US and Japan. In fact, Japan's influence on the American game development market is well-established.[8] Instead, I think this may be a case of the Global North discounting the creative labor of the Global South. As Levander and Mignolo argue, "changing the accent from Western Hemisphere to Hemispheric South and from East-West relations (Occcidentalism/Orientalism) to North/South relations opens up in terms of ways of knowing and access to decolonial forms of expression."[9] The gaming press's specific criticisms of *Flappy Bird* feed into a larger historical trend of double standards between labor in China and Southeast Asia on one hand and labor in the US on the other. We might consider in what ways critiques of *Flappy Bird* reflect the hegemony of the Global North in ways that racialize Vietnamese developers in a different way than Japanese and Korean developers, while still acknowledging that these critiques often also contained a flattening techno-orientalism that homogenizes and decontextualizes Asian labor.

At the same time, there were other factors that limited *Flappy Bird*'s critical success, including its mass appeal, its platform, and its freeness. I contend that this use of the double standard demonstrates the ways in which race becomes intertwined with other narratives surrounding labor in the video game industry, including its rhetorical configuration as

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[7] Aja Romano, "Did Racism in Gaming Culture Drive Flappy Bird Offline?," *The Daily Dot* (blog), February 12, 2014, https://www.dailydot.com/via/flappy-bird-racism/.

[8] Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 2016), 14.

[9] Caroline Levander and Walter Mignolo, "Introduction: The Global South and World Dis/Order," *The Global South* 5, no. 1 (2011): 9–10.

meritocratic, creative, and a result of the passion of the developers. This chapter continues the work of the previous chapter in contextualizing the state of free games and labor in the platformized economy of the web. To understand this relationship, it explores the negative reaction to the success of *Flappy Bird* on the part of the gaming press. The intention of this chapter is not to make an argument for the objective quality of *Flappy Bird*. Rather, it asks why the gaming press was so intent on presenting *Flappy Bird* as a poor-quality game in the first place. In other words, what threat did *Flappy Bird's* success represent, and why did it need to be contained? The answers to this question become a way to understand the relationship between labor and value in free game platforms like the App Store. *Flappy Bird's* success represents a problem in the system. Here is a game that did not take long to make, uses mechanics and programming that are seemingly unpolished at best and bad at worst, and uses art that is pretty basic. And yet, it makes thousands of dollars in advertisement revenue for its developer every day. Ultimately, this is the threat that free games pose on the marketplace; their low cost to play makes it easy to entice audiences without needing to do the extended work required to justify a price tag.

The threat of free games also has a class component. It is no secret that mobile games are often considered inferior to their counterparts that are made for consoles or PCs. As I will demonstrate later, much of the issue with *Flappy Bird* was placed squarely at the feet of the mobile game industry, which is often accused of cranking out clones and copies of the same game. Moreover, mobile audiences themselves are implicated, with both commenters and journalists arguing that they don't have the same level of refinement in taste that console and especially PC gamers have. Mobile games are much more accessible, cheaper, and require less up-front economic investment than consoles or PCs, especially considering players would very

often already have a smartphone. Mobile game audiences also skew toward women and toward people from the global south much more than console and PC audiences do. The most popular subreddit for PC gaming is called PC Master Race, a title which in addition to the obvious nefarious connotations demonstrates a clear distaste for any fans of video games that don't play on PC. This disdain could explain why many commentators were unable to explain the success of *Flappy Bird* without resorting to attacks on mobile gaming writ large.

It seems that much of the gaming press sees a large disconnect between the labor required to make *Flappy Bird* and its financial success. This could be seen as an ideological problem in an industry which often presents itself as meritocratic, justifying crunch time and other exploitative labor practices by appealing to workers' passion for games.[10] So luck—Nguyen's explanation of choice for describing the popularity of his game—is not an acceptable explanation for success. I argue that the gaming media's demonization of *Flappy Bird* as a bad game serves as an aesthetic judgement to reify industrial narratives around fairness and labor, the legitimacy of the game critics as both journalists and tastemakers, and hegemonic regimes of value that the game's success seems to challenge, especially as it relates to racialized labor standards in the independent gaming industry. A constellation of textual and paratextual characteristics of *Flappy Bird*, including its author's identity, the nature of the labor behind it, its aesthetic and ludic qualities, and indeed its free-ness, all served as focal points for the game press outlets to contend against *Flappy Bird*'s fairness and undermine its success. Ultimately, this case study points to a larger application of collectively understood ideas of fairness, value, and quality to video game

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[10] Mia Consalvo, "Crunched by Passion: Women Game Developers and Workplace Challenges.," in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, ed. Yasmin B. Kafai et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 181.

development as an industry, the varying degrees and uneven situations in which those standards are applied, and the role of the gaming press in regulating and applying them.

Central to this chapter is an analysis of the ways in which aesthetic judgements against a game stand in for larger judgements against the value of *Flappy Bird* as a whole and against the integrity of its creator. I find that the reaction to *Flappy Bird* on the part of the press can be perfectly characterized by the aesthetic judgements of the "gimmick" and the "knockoff." As Sianne Ngai theorizes, the gimmick is an aesthetic judgment that attempts to explain what might be seen as a disconnect between time and value. It strikes the audience as working too little and too uncreatively, but at the same time too hard and too unnaturally. For example, the fixation on the difficulty of *Flappy Bird* and whether or not it was intentional often exemplified this discourse. Reviewers argued both that the game was difficult simply because it wasn't fine-tuned enough, such as *Time*'s Matt Peckham lamenting the lack of ease into the control scheme (not working hard enough), but also difficult because it was trying too hard to appeal to audiences of harder games, as with Charles Pratt's comparison of the game to *Dark Souls*.[11] In this judgement, she explains that "we are thus registering an uncertainty about labor—its deficiency or excess—that is also an uncertainty about value and time."[12] This is clear in the press reactions. When *Kotaku* editor Jason Schreier writes "let this be a life lesson: if you want to make $50,000 a day, put ripped art in a terrible game"[13] he is registering a concern about the lack of creative

[11] Matt Peckham, "No, You Don't Have to Play Flappy Bird," *Time*, February 3, 2014, https://time.com/4034/no-you-dont-have-to-play-flappy-bird/; Charles Pratt, "Flappy Bird Is Proof That No One Knows What the Audience Wants," *Polygon* (blog), February 5, 2014, https://www.polygon.com/2014/2/5/5382450/flappy-bird-is-proof-that-no-one-knows-what-the-audience-is-looking.

[12] Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 1.

[13] Jason Schreier, "Flappy Bird Is Making $50,000 A Day Off Ripped Art," *Kotaku* (blog), February 6, 2014, https://kotaku.com/flappy-bird-is-making-50-000-a-day-off-ripped-art-1517498140.

labor and labor-time embedded in a product that is nevertheless generating a lot of capital (value). Moreover, the gimmick is a judgement that works only insofar as it is being leveraged against the offender in some kind of speech act. The act also serves to identify the speaker as above the thing being proffered. Ngai writes that "it is what we say when we want to demonstrate that we, unlike others implicitly invoked or imagined in the same moment, are not buying into what a capitalist device is promising."[14] Schreier, in disavowing *Flappy Bird* as a gimmicky, bad game, is at the same time elevating his status as a tastemaker and arbiter of quality in the gaming space to establish norms of taste.

In fact, the gaming press has a history of using and re-using the critique of the "gimmick" against anything that seemed new or out of the ordinary, or that it felt didn't deserve its success. One notable example is the Nintendo Wii. Because of its unusual motion controls, many contemporary reviewers found the Wii unable to stack up to the Xbox 360 and the Playstation 3. Pretty instantaneously, these controls were labeled as a gimmick. Writing for NBC News, Winda Beneddeti explained "the Wii has earned its fair share of haters thanks, in part, to the motion controls, which some have felt are frustratingly shallow [and] gimmicky,"[15] while Alex Carlson of *Hardcore Gamer* claimed that "Motion controls were labeled as gimmicks the second Nintendo whipped out their weird wand controller."[16] The particular quirkiness of the Wii's motion controls soon developed its own nickname —the waggle—a term coined by *1Up*'s

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[14] Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 5.

[15] Winda Benedetti, "'Wii Sports Resort' Is a Great Gaming Getaway," *NBC News*, February 27, 2009, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna32106750.

[16] Alex Carlson, "What Makes a Gimmick (And How Can We Avoid Them)? - Hardcore Gamer," *Hardcore Gamer* (blog), December 27, 2014, https://hardcoregamer.com/features/articles/opinion/what-makes-a-gimmick-and-how-can-we-avoid-them/124971/.

Jeremy Parish to describe the particular lack creativity he saw developers treating the Wii's motion controls with, but which was soon applied more generally to the kind of jerkiness of Wii motion.[17] The dislike for this use of motion controls grew so great that future *Kotaku* editor Stephen Totilo eventually dedicated a whole article, entitled "A Wii Game Without Waggle" to praising the Ubisoft minigame collection *Raving Rabbids Travel in Time* for simply not employing it.[18] Despite these criticisms, the Wii sold over 100 million units, becoming one of the best-selling video game consoles of all time. Nevertheless, some gaming press retrospectives were not kind to the Wii. Writing for *USGamer*, Kat Bailey "The Wii may have been a short-term sensation, but it was neither able to make a lasting impact with its motion controls nor hold on to its audience; and with a few exceptions…its library was deeply disappointing. And so with that, I'm afraid I have to say that the Wii was ultimately a failure."[19] By categorizing the Wii as a gimmick, the press can write off its success as a fluke or claim that it was undeserving. As was the case with *Flappy Bird*, much of this had as much to do with who was playing and designing these games as the merit of the games themselves.

Importantly, leveraging "gimmick" as a critique also involves the regulation and reification of *communal* norms surrounding value. It becomes shorthand for registering discomfort with the outsized valuation of an object in a way that violates standards. "For here our dissatisfaction with the form of the object, based on spontaneous appraisals of the labor,

[17] JC Fletcher, "Parish on the Problem of 'Waggling the Dog,'" *Engadget*, April 3, 2007, https://www.engadget.com/2007-04-03-parish-on-the-problem-of-waggling-the-dog.html.

[18] Stephen Totilo, "A Wii Game Without Waggle," *Kotaku* (blog), July 9, 2010, https://kotaku.com/a-wii-game-without-waggle-5583147.

[19] Kat Bailey, "Ten Years Later: USgamer Debates Whether the Nintendo Wii Was a Success or a Failure," *USgamer* (blog), November 22, 2016, https://www.usgamer.net/articles/ten-years-later-usgamer-debates--nintendo-wii-was-a-success-or-a-failure.

time, or value it embodies," writes Ngai, "quickly morphs into ethical, historical, and economical evaluations of it as fraudulent, untimely, and cheap."[20] The gimmick is akin to "registering a multilayered 'felt disorder of norms'" which are "all based on interlinking estimations of value, labor, and time."[21] In other words, calling something a gimmick reinforces communal norms about what is valuable and what is acceptable. These norms begin with aesthetic evaluation but through judgement move into the realm of ethics and economics. For example, much of the anxiety surrounding the Wii as a gimmick also coincided with anxiety surrounding the inclusion of casual gaming audiences into the traditionally hardcore console space. Writing for VentureBeat in 2011, Judson Rose claimed that Nintendo's desire to include motion controls was in effect abandoning their audience who wanted the precise, intuitive feel of a standard controller.[22] Similarly, Bailey described the Wii as "a letdown for core gamers. Motion controls were sold as a method that would unlock whole new ways of playing games; but in the end, nothing came of it…there is a yawning divide between "gamers" and the rest of the populace."[23] Similarly, several elements of *Flappy Bird* have been discussed as gimmicks—its difficulty, its marketing—and those elements also represent anxieties surrounding the popularity of a game understood by most metrics to be of low quality and uncertainty in the global mobile market and audience demand. In video game culture, as I will explain in the next section, fairness and passion are the specific norms that shape the community and are not coincidentally the norms in which Dong Nguyen is seen as being in violation.

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[20] Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 23.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Judson Rose, "Motion Controls, or the Little Gimmick That Could," *VentureBeat* (blog), September 29, 2011, https://venturebeat.com/2011/09/28/motion-controls-or-the-little-gimmick-that-could/.

[23] Bailey, "Ten Years Later."

Knockoffs have a similar history as an immediate aesthetic judgment that carries with it a much larger connotation of value, especially in relation to copyright. Ideas must be protected because it is the protection that guarantees people will come up with more ideas, as the story goes. In the United States, copyright and patent law has two justifications: a practical one (copying ideas will destroy competition) and a moral one (copying is like stealing, which is wrong).[24] But these have caveats and complications. In the United States, original copyright laws only protected the idea for 20 years, but due to corporate lobbying the limit had been extended by decades to the point where it may discourage innovation as companies can just hold on to profitable ideas. And while knockoffs may occupy a moral gray area, they are not morally equivalent to stealing because the original copyright holder still gets to keep their idea after it is copied. As Raustiala and Sprigman note, the idea that copying is bad for innovation is more often bad in theory than it is in practice, and that it's actually the knockoffs themselves that spur innovation. They argue that "despite the widespread view that copying is a serious threat, when we stop and look at a broader range of creative industries, we see that imitation often co-exists with innovation."[25] This is all to say that ideas around intellectual property that feel rigid (copyright is good, copying is bad) are widely open to interpretation and nuance. In fact, whether we call something a knockoff in video games has more to do with reception than it does to do with copyright. Since mechanics cannot be copyrighted, studios and developers are constantly taking whole cloth from each other with no deference. One recent example includes the myriad of battle royale games that have been developed, a genre which first started as a mod to CS:GO, before it became commercialized with *Player Unknown's Battlegrounds, Fortnite, and Apex*

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[24] Kal Raustiala and Christopher Jon Sprigman, *The Knockoff Economy: How Imitation Sparks Innovation* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[25] Ibid, 16.

Legends. As Leigh Alexander explores in *Game Developer,* the Mobile space in particular is built entirely on clones and innovation: *Angry Birds* entirely lifted its basic mechanical premise from an older Flash game called *Crush the Castle*, *2048* copies the gameplay of the IGF-nominated *Threes*, and *Candy Crush* is a bejeweled clone. But what makes these games viable is their ability to attract an audience and iterate on that which they have copied. Not every copy is labeled a knockoff.

Knockoffs also carry with them a racialized component in our current globalized economy. The idea of "cheap Asian labor" has a history that reflects on the use of outsourced labor to make cheap knockoff commodities. As Minh T. Pham writes in her discussion of Asian bloggers in the fashion industry, cheapness has come to signify a racialized and gendered aesthetic accusation that moves beyond the economic value of labor and toward a neoliberal understanding of taste and style as markers of individual worth, even if the labor is economically valuable.[26] In this vein, I would extend the discussion of cheapness to the aesthetic conventions leveraged at *Flappy Bird* as a knockoff—even if it makes a lot of money, the fact that it "looks cheap" and the idea that it copies established games are proof of its technical and artistic failings which justify its marginalization on the part of the press.

[26] Minh-Hà T. Phạm, *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet: Race, Gender, and the Work of Personal Style Blogging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 71.

A Review of the Literature

Fairness and Value

Game studies has long theorized the politics of fairness. Mia Consalvo has argued that cheating is often narrowly defined by players as "as an activity that confers unfair advantage to the player."[27] What is considered unfair, however, is open to group interpretation with the norms of gaming culture and the circulation of gaming capital providing nuance and contradiction to the concept of fairness. Consalvo writes that "the common thread appeared to be that cheating was more than just breaking a rule or law; it was also those instances of bending or reinterpreting rules to the players' advantage. Players actively made ethical judgments about gameplay that extended beyond the coded rules of the game."[28] Gaming capital is displayed primarily through the seemingly meritocratic metrics of technological skill and mastery of gaming. But the understanding of video game culture as a meritocracy elides the structural inequality that exists within it. Importantly for this chapter, the meritocratic patina of video game culture extends to the video game industry as well. Because there is a lack of clear intellectual property guidelines for video games in copyright law, at least in the US, the industry instead relies on an ideological doctrine of fairness to protect against IP theft.[29] At the same time, the ideology of meritocracy for the video game industry sets up a justification for both its incredibly white, male, and young workforce and the fact that gaming companies are unwilling to produce games with female protagonists or protagonists of color for fear of "developers and publishers are structured to

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[27] Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, First MIT Press paperback edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009), 103.

[28] Consalvo, *Cheating*, 87.

[29] Shani Shisha, "Fairness, Copyright, and Video Games: Hate the Game, Not the Player," *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media and Entertainment Law Journal* 31, no. 3 (2021): 694.

encourage a conservative approach to game development, one that replicates the meritocratic dependency and audiences of past successes rather than striking out on new paths."[30] The fear of competition and punishment from deviation actually hinders the diversification of games, despite the framework of creativity and novelty being keys to success.

But it's not just inter-industry competition in the gaming industry that uses fairness as an ideological justification for structural inequalities. Tara Fickle argues in *The Race Card* that, in setting up the stakes for economic hegemony over Asia, fairness "becomes America's currency in the ideological economy."[31] If the playing field is fair, then the Global North's domination in media spaces is seen as natural and justified. This is exemplified by Barack Obama's strange assertion in regard to the Chinese trade war that "when the rules are fair, we win every time." This demonstrates the pattern in which orientalist frameworks of Asian industrial practices become imbricated in discourses of fairness. For example, the moral panic around gold farming in games like *World of Warcraft* shows a clear demarcation along issues of fairness; on the one hand is "the sense of economic injustice and victimization on the part of American gamers" and on the other is "the vilification of gold farmers as cheats and "leeches" who care nothing for fair play."[32] This racialization is clear in specific examples such as Lisa Nakamura's discussion of gold farming as a racialized form of labor through fan machinima.[33] But more generally, the perceived cheapness of Asian labor, especially Chinese and Southeast Asian labor, can be read as

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[30] Christopher A. Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 5.

[31] Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 178.

[32] Fickle, *The Race Card,* 182.

[33] Lisa Nakamura, "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (June 2009): 128–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030902860252.

a transgression against the fairness of the global economy. In the case of *Flappy Bird*, it also represents a perceived unfairness related to the gaming economy and the work of hardworking developers who are not successful.

The Gaming Press and Ideology

Games journalism has complicated relationships not only to the industry and to fans, but to other forms of journalism as well. It has origins not in the traditional newsroom ecology of print newspapers, but in 1980s enthusiast publications like *Electronic Games Magazine* and *Computer Gaming World* as well as quasi-dependent publications like *Nintendo Power* and EB Games' *Game Informer*. Because of these origins and its function as lifestyle journalism, some scholars have argued that gaming journalism is seen as less legitimate than other forms of journalism.[34] At the same time, gaming journalists often have very different goals and functions from other kinds of journalists. One function of the gaming press is to operate as gatekeepers between the industry and audiences, a position which gives them great authority and early access to games but at the same time requires a difficult balance between editorial objectivity and a reliance on the gaming industry as its primary advertiser and source of content.[35] As cultural journalists, games critics are also mediators in their own rights. "cultural journalists and critics are both gatekeepers and tastemakers…deciding and defining what counts as valuable culture and good taste in specific moments in time."[36]

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[34] Gregory Perreault and Tim Vos, "Metajournalistic Discourse on the Rise of Gaming Journalism," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 1 (January 2020): 163, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819858695.

[35] David B. Nieborg and Tanja Sihvonen, "The New Gatekeepers: The Occupational Ideology of Game Journalism," in *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*, vol. 5, 2009.

[36] Riie Heikkilä, Tina Lauronen, and Semi Purhonen, "The Crisis of Cultural Journalism Revisited: The Space and Place of Culture in Quality European Newspapers from 1960 to 2010," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no.

Importantly, a key function of gaming journalism is to formulate and reinforce specific regimes of value in gaming culture. This is true in the literal sense that reviews are meant to influence readers on where to spend their money, but also in that the gaming press functions to contribute to and influence the ideological components of gaming space. By this I mean that in their quest to determine what counts as "valuable culture and good taste," critics often re-inscribe the extant markers of good taste and value that are already present in gaming culture, such as technological hierarchies, geek masculinity, and whiteness. Historically within the gaming press this has helped reify identity of legitimate gaming fans, or gamers, to fit within these same identity categories.[37] Tautologically, inscribing these identities legitimizes games critics as arbiters of the value of gaming commodities through taste cultures, often positioning themselves as the most legitimate source for determining the quality of a game, more than both audiences and producers. Rachel Carlson describes the gaming press as an "enthusiast press" that serve as cultural mediators of commodity value through their performance of expertise, which at the same time serves to invalidate the expertise of producers and fans.[38] As enthusiasts, gaming journalists often prioritize previous knowledge and "gaming capital" over journalistic or writing experience. This practice of already hiring utilizing writers who are able to demonstrate gaming capital also creates something of a self-enforcing monoculture which is not open to dissenting opinions. At the same time, Maxwell Foxman and David B. Nieborg argue that modern gaming journalism has developed a "network of ambivalences" between the desire to legitimize itself and include

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6 (December 2018): 670, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549416682970.

[37] Maxwell Foxman and David B. Nieborg, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Games Coverage and Its Network of Ambivalences," *Journal of Games Criticism* 3, no. 1 (January 22, 2016): 7.

[38] Rebecca Carlson, "'Too Human' versus the Enthusiast Press: Video Game Journalists as Mediators of Commodity Value," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 2 (March 15, 2009), https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.098.

more diverse voices and remain an enthusiast press that appeals to fans.[39] I would argue that this desire for legitimacy often manifests in the desire to insulate the medium of video games from criticism by marginalizing certain forms of games and dictating what kinds of game commodities, and therefore what kinds of game labor, are valuable.

Methods and Methodology

As its primary form of data, this chapter uses articles and blog posts written by the gaming press and the popular press on the subject of *Flappy Bird*—reviews, criticism, news, and entertainment pieces—as well as comments and other attached interactions from readers. I collected articles from press outlets in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and Hong Kong. These articles were largely published between January and March of 2014. To get a general sense of the affective feel of the articles at the time, I coded approximately fifty articles used for this chapter in terms of their sentiment, as well as their primary criticisms (if any) toward *Flappy Bird*. Through this process I was able to get a sense of the trending opinions about the game.

The next part of the analytical work of this chapter involves doing a deeper critical discourse analysis on these articles. Textual analysis of news media as a method allows for tracking the narrativized versions of events and the proposed realities that they appear to confirm. I am interested not in *Flappy Bird* as a game or Dong Nguyen's production process per se, but rather in the reality constructed discursively through the gaming press and how it reinforces certain narratives about the video game industry. Elfriede Fürsich has argued that "since media are such significant institutions for creating meaning in our societies one of the

[39] Foxman and Nieborg, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," 19.

central tasks of media scholars should be to analyze and interpret what spectrum of reality media. allow for."[40] Part of this work is acknowledging that the news media as discourse are seen not only to reflect the social processes and ideologies of the time, but in fact produce and shape these processes and ideologies.[41] The articles and comments in question paint a specific narrative of the trajectory of *Flappy Bird* over the course of those three months. Part of the benefit of textual analysis is the ability to chart the trajectory of the narratives put forth in media and their assumed worldview and ideological underpinnings. Reading articles in this way enables an understanding of how news media can function to create a "collective identity" for the reading public.[42] This is especially true in more specialized and insular media formations like the gaming news media.

In this chapter I want to specify the specific form of critical discourse analysis being used. I will be thinking with Ruth Wodak in performing a "socio-diagnostic critique" which attempts not only to narrativize the discourse but also frame it within the larger historical trends through contextual knowledge. This kind of critique asks that a scholar "makes use of [their] background and contextual knowledge and embeds the communicative or interactional structures of a discursive event in a wider frame of social and political relations, processes and circumstances."[43] In my case, my experiences as an early adopter of *Flappy Bird* and as a gaming journalist at the time of the game's peak in popularity are useful to help me quickly establish trends and remember cultural context and where to discover relevant sources. It is

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[40] Elfriede Fürsich, "In Defense of Textual Analysis: Restoring a Challenged Method for Journalism and Media Studies," *Journalism Studies* 10, no. 2 (April 2009): 246, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700802374050.

[41] David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012), 24.

[42] Fursich, "In Defense," 245.

[43] Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach," in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, Introducing Qualitative Methods (London ; Thousand Oaks [Calif.]: SAGE, 2001), 65.

ultimately the goal of this chapter to contextualize these specific criticisms and discussions of *Flappy Bird* within larger ideological frames toward labor, creativity, and quality in order to identify and critique discourses that continue to impact the gaming industry to this day.

Clipping *Flappy Bird*'s Wings

There appear to be three primary accusations leveraged against *Flappy Bird* by the game press and other critical voices. They are: 1) *Flappy Bird* is a bad game, 2) *Flappy Bird* uses stolen or unoriginal art, and 3) *Flappy Bird*'s success was due to the manipulation of the app store rankings using bots. No matter the particular flavor of critique, however, all three ultimately maintain the same position—*Flappy Bird* does not deserve its success, and by extension neither does Dong Nguyen. More specifically, they are criticisms of Nguyen's perceived violations of fairness standards in the gaming industry. Whether it's through the effort heuristic, accusations of plagiarism or unoriginality, or (unfounded) claims of unfairly manipulating the app store, the narratives of these reviews often tie in to an implicit judgement of why the game doesn't deserve its success. These criticisms are often placed explicitly as a way of steering the audience away from the game, such as Matt Peckham's piece "No, You Don't Have to Play Flappy Bird" in *Time Magazine.* The tagline of the article reveals the pitch: "It's bad and popular -- imagine that."[44] Taken in combination, these words both imply some kind of FOMO on the part of potential *Flappy Bird* players who may feel that they should try the popular game and at the same time pre-enable a feeling of superiority for users who don't take the bait. It also represents a class-based argument surrounding the value of free games: if a game is free and

[44] Peckham, "No, You Don't Have to Play Flappy Bird."

popular, it can't be good. Ultimately, a negative review for a free game must not only do the work of demonstrating a lack of value for the game but also why avoiding it creates value for the player, whether that comes in the form of spending time on other things, an artificial sense of superiority over lowly *Flappy* enthusiasts, or saving an industry they love from the existential threat of stolen art and bots.

It is here that the freeness of *Flappy Bird* dictates the strategies used against it. Unable to argue that *Flappy Bird* isn't worth the money, which is what most negative game reviews would say, Peckham argues that it is not worth the player's time. He writes that getting a high score equates to "10,000 taps out of your life — 83 minutes of consecutive tapping if we assume two taps per second…that you can never, ever have back."[45] Similarly, *USG*'s Pete Davsion argues "It may be immediately satisfying to waste your time with it in the short term, but when you look back on how your day went, you'll find yourself wishing you'd used those hours for something more productive or stimulating… there are far too many brilliant games out there going unplayed to ever justify wasting your time with Flappy Bird."[46] In these and other reviews there appears a trend to associate value and time. For many free to play games, such as league of legends, high prices for cosmetic collectibles are often justified by the amount of time spent within the game environment which equates to value generated. Moreover, the time spent in the game generates a perceived affective relationship between the player and the developer.[47] This relationship is not built on the quality of the game per se, but on the perceived fairness of the game and the built up good will through continuous play. It is curious, then, that the reaction to *Flappy Bird* perceives

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Davison. "Flappy Bird iOS review."

[47] Josh Jarrett, "Gaming the Gift: The Affective Economy of League of Legends 'Fair' Free-to-Play Model," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 21, no. 1 (February 2021): 104, https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540521993932.

an almost inverse relationship, where the more time is spent on the game the more value is generated for a developer who "did a bad job." Peckham and Davison's critiques rely on the reader agreeing with the premise that spending time in this free game developing the skills necessary to climb the leaderboards (or at least beat your friends) is not only a waste of time but also rewards a bad game. Otherwise it would just be like playing any other free game, where the player has a nice time and develops an appreciation for the developer and that they feel ok with giving the developer money in the form of purchases or simply watching an ad. This is why the bad game critique is a crucial component of the anti-*Flappy Bird* rhetoric.

As Rachel Carlson argues, one primary role of the gaming press as cultural value mediator is not only to judge the monetary value of specific games, but to regulate norms and ideologies in gaming culture. She writes:

> Video game journalists…work explicitly to "define and fix" the consumer norms, desires, and tastes of video game fans…they function to create a continued need among consumers for games and to situate a gaming lifestyle or gamer identity—necessarily linked to continued emotional and monetary engagement—as desirable. Positioned between production and consumption, game journalists mediate "appropriate" game knowledge as well as commodity value.[48]

So the bad game critique is not simply one of judging whether a singular commodity has value. It also has a regulatory function for what kinds of games and what kinds of sensibilities are acceptable in video game culture. This is why, as we will see in the following sections, the aesthetic and moral qualms levied against *Flappy Bird* often become a stand-in for all mobile games or all games that don't fit a particular mode of acceptable development style.

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[48] Carlson, "'Too Human' versus the Enthusiast Press."

Flappy Bird is a Bad Game

"Flappy Bird is a bad game" would not be a difficult opinion to come across in the early months of 2014. Most mainstream sources began covering it in late January. *Buzzfeed*'s Joseph Bernstein called it "borderline crappy" on January 23rd,[49] *Kotaku*'s Mike Fahey called it an "impossible ad-ridden mess,"[50] *MacWorld UK*'s Lucy Hattersley called it a "terrible, terrible piece of software"[51] and *CNET*'s Nick Stratt called it "the embodiment of our descent into madness."[52] Importantly, even reviews that were somewhat mixed or even positive, such as Bernstein's, often felt the need to comment on the "unpolished" state of the game as a form of legitimization. This often reads like "I know this game is bad, but I still think it has something to offer" rather than "this game is good." Bernstein writes, for instance, "That may be why the game is ultimately so brilliant: It's terrible and crappy and soulless, but also wonderful and addictive and funny. It is hideous and pixelated but nostalgic and beautiful. It's incredibly hard but it also exacts no cost for losing."[53] All of these reviews communicate a complete bewilderment regarding the seemingly incompatible ideas that *Flappy Bird* looks the way it does and is also incredibly popular.

One of the most noteworthy trends that I noticed in these early reviews was an apprehension toward giving Dong Nguyen any real creative agency in the development of the game. Rather than treating him as a developer who made any conscientious choices toward fine

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[49] Bernstein, "Why On Earth."

[50] Fahey, "The Most Popular App."

[51] Lucy Hattersley, "Flappy Bird Review," *Macworld UK* (blog), February 5, 2014, https://www.macworld.co.uk/review/flappy-bird-review-3500638/.

[52] Stratt, "Flappy Bird"

[53] Bernstein, "Why On Earth."

tuning the mechanics or making the game flow, he was often treated as somebody who simply lucked into making a game that people found enticing. One of the clearest examples of this opinion comes from Charles Pratt's *Polygon* review. He writes, "it seems to be engineered and designed by someone still learning how to create games…Flappy Bird has absolutely no sense of what indie game developers call 'feel.' The hitboxes are ridiculously large, which is the source of much of the game's difficulty. The flapping mechanic, while serviceable, is entirely ordinary. It looks and feels like a game design student's first project in their intro to programming class."[54] This rhetoric sees Nguyen not as someone who is actively making development decisions but someone who was just learning and accidentally ended up with a hit. In fact, the difficulty of the game due to its "poor design" was seen as one of the major drawbacks, despite the fact that the difficulty was not due to a lack of design knowledge on Nguyen's part but rather a purposeful nod to difficult arcade games. Another supposed piece of evidence that the game was sub-par were its basic graphics and sound effects. Hattersley writes:

> The visuals are low-resolution and of low quality…the Flappy Bird has three frames of animation to complete the retro-gaming effect. The Start and Score buttons look like Flash-era web graphics. The ground is a rolling two-tone green barbershop pole; the pipes are from Super Mario Bros., the background is a static city made of, what looks like, clip art…the game is repetitive, bland and mediocre.[55]

Again, this opinion matches much of what the rest of the gaming press was saying at the time. They didn't read the game as a purposeful throwback to 8-bit graphics, but rather as a poor attempt to make something on a budget. These reviews generally misconstrue the creative labor done by Nguyen in favor of negative commentary about the capricious nature of the app store audience preferences. The point here is not that the reviews were negative per se, but that their

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[54] Pratt, "Flappy Bird Is Proof."

[55] Hattersley, "Flappy Bird Review."

negativity only works on a bad faith assumption of the work behind the game. All of the rhetoric of the negative reviews of *Flappy Bird* replicate the language of cheapness and low-skill that mark larger economic discussions of Southeast Asia and its ties to clothing manufacturing. Minh-Ha T. Pham points out that "Chinese, Bangladeshi, Thai, Vietnamese, and Sri Lankan garment workers and electronics manufacturing workers in Asia embody cheap labor both in the global economy and the global imaginary."[56] Even when that labor is valuable, though, another compounding discourse surrounding US perceptions of Asian labor is what Niral Shah deems the "mongoloid android," that is, Shah argues that the primary subject position available to Asian people in the US is one that simultaneously positions them as simultaneously superior in the context of mathematical and technical skill and precision and inferior in the inability to perform creative or original labor.[57] This fits the framing of Nguyen as someone who is clearly adept at learning to make games but who is not able to come up with original ideas or novel approaches to mechanics.

This is especially circumspect because the exact aspects of *Flappy Bird* that generated scorn from the gaming press in 2014 are the same attributes that defined the success of indie games at the same time. As Jesper Juul explains, references to earlier pixel art style was an important part of demarcating indie style and authenticity.[58] For *Flappy Bird* specifically, Juul notes that, despite the usual trappings of an "authentic" indie game, it was not afforded the same

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[56] Pham, *Asians Wearing Clothes*, 71.

[57] Niral Shah, "'Asians Are Good at Math' Is Not a Compliment: STEM Success as a Threat to Personhood," *Harvard Educational Review* 89, no. 4 (December 1, 2019): 674, https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-89.4.661.

[58] Jesper Juul, *Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 45.

level of prestige or even the assumption of artistic intent.[59] Difficulty, also, is a legitimizing characteristic in gaming. From console darlings like *Dark Souls* to successful indies like *Super Meat Boy*, difficulty has been hailed as a legitimizing component of gameplay. In fact, difficulty in gameplay as a heuristic for measuring success has governed gaming culture's ideological components including geek masculinity.[60] Suffice to say, these characteristics are usually treated as markers of success, not failure. Yet something about *Flappy Bird* has reoriented the press' reading of difficult design and retro aesthetics to something at best naïve and at worst dangerous.

The press treatment of *Flappy Bird* not only dismissed Nguyen's creative agency, it also often specifically argued that Nguyen could not possibly be referencing certain popular indie games that seemed on the surface to fit in with *Flappy Bird*'s aesthetic, whether visual or in terms of mechanics or difficulty. Referencing Ian Bogost's parodical Facebook game, Peckham calls it "*Cow Clicker* without the satire value."[61] Davison's review compares it unfavorably to *Super Hexagon*: "It taps into those same sort of primal urges to do better that deliberately simple but difficult games like Super Hexagon manipulate -- the difference between Flappy Bird and Super Hexagon being that Terry Cavanagh's classic features a much better sense of pacing and gradation of difficulty, whereas Flappy Bird is just the same thing over and over and over again."[62] Bogost himself argues that despite similarities to "masocore" titles like *Super Meat Boy* and *I Wanna Be The Guy*, *Flappy Bird* allegedly was not built to fit in with a particular difficult

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[59] Ibid., 180.

[60] Nicholas A. Hanford, "At the Intersection of Difficulty and Masculinity: Crafting the Play Ethic," in *Masculinities in Play*, ed. Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees, Palgrave Games in Context (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 150.

[61] Peckham, "No, You Don't Have to Play Flappy Bird."

[62] Davison, "Flappy Bird iOS Review."

gameplay mode. Rather, he theorizes that "Flappy Bird is not difficult to challenge you, nor even to teach the institution of videogames a thing or two. Rather, Flappy Bird is difficult because that's how it is."[63] As far as the press is concerned, *Flappy Bird* could not be participating in the artistic tradition of games past.

But if those writers had done their research, they would know that this simply isn't true. While it's true that there is no evidence that Nguyen considers *Flappy Bird* part of the masocore genre, he did create *Flappy Bird* with some specific design intentions and inspirations that were ostensibly illegible to his critics. Nguyen has stated that his major mechanical inspiration for *Flappy Bird* was his love of easy to learn, difficult to master games like those early arcade games made for the Atari 2600 or the NES, as well as his habit of bouncing a ping pong ball on a paddle as many times in a row as he could.[64] Graphically, Nguyen has several inspirations as well. He has said that he is inspired by the Super Nintendo Entertainment System era of graphics,[65] as well as 1980s-era Japanese comics which emphasize bright colors and distinct line work.[66] For whatever reason, though, these mechanical and artistic references that Nguyen was conscientiously referring to in his development and in his description of his work did not resonate as legitimizing factors in the press. Some contemporary critics also noticed this trend among games journalists' treatment of Nguyen, paying particular attention to the potentially

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[63] Bogost, "The Squalid Grace of Flappy Bird."

[64] Kushner, "The Flight of the Birdman."

[65] Ibid.

[66] Do Trong, "Cha đẻ Flappy Bird: Không điều hành, chỉ giỏi nhất là thiết kế game," *VietnamPlus* (blog), January 19, 2016, https://www.vietnamplus.vn/cha-de-flappy-bird-khong-dieu-hanh-chi-gioi-nhat-la-thiet-ke-game/367145.vnp.

different treatment an American indie developer might have experienced instead. Designer Robert Yang wrote:

> I suspect that if Nguyen were a white American, this would've been the story of a scrappy indie who managed to best Zynga with his loving homage to Nintendo's apparent patent on green pixel pipes and the classic "helicopter cave" game genre. Instead, Dong Nguyen committed the crime of being from Vietnam…The derivative nature of Flappy Bird's assets and mechanics was taken as confirmation that technologically-backward Southeast Asians were "at it again" -- stealing and cloning hard-won "innovation in games" invented by more-beloved developers.[67]

This assessment was shared by other contemporary critics and developers, including Ian Bogost, Mattie Brice, and Bennett Foddy.

One possible explanation for this disconnect could be Nguyen's outsider status from the gaming community, and specifically his status as a Vietnamese developer. It also mirrors the previously discussed rhetorics of fairness that permeate discussions of Asian nations on a macroeconomic level. The xenophobic idea of an outsider coming in and doing a job for cheaper is not new. But it was new to the indie movement, where *Flappy Bird* represented somewhat of an existential threat to the hegemony of American developers in the indie space. Nguyen's imperfect English also meant that he was often unwilling to engage with press, and his silence was presented as proof that the criticisms against him were true. In a Vietnamese-language interview with Trong Do, he said that his lack of English skill was his number one barrier to getting into the global development scene when he first started, specifically because of the high use of jargon and technical vocabulary in video game development.[68] Finally, the context with which Nguyen is considering distribution is also important. Though reviews called the game an

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[67] Robert Yang, "An Alternate History of Flappy Bird: 'We Must Cultivate Our Garden.,'" *Radiator* (blog), February 9, 2014, https://www.blog.radiator.debacle.us/2014/02/an-alternate-history-of-flappy-bird-we.html.

[68] Ibid.

"ad-riddled mess" and often complained about how advertisements ruined the experience and that there were no microtransactions to turn them off (unlike free-to-play mobile games, which are chockablock with microtransactions), Nguyen is working off another model. Specifically, he mentions the Japanese app marketplace. In an interview with *The Verge*, he said "I want to make an ads-based game because it is very common in the Japanese market —minigames are free and have ads."[69] That may not have made the addition of ads aesthetically pleasing, but it have been seen as less idiosyncratic with the rest of the market if this was more common at the time.

The final way in which the development of *Flappy Bird* was critiqued had not so much to do with the quality of the labor behind it but rather with the quantity. Nguyen was pretty candid that the development of the game only took a few days (though the complete story of *Flappy Bird* stretches well back into 2012 when Nguyen first created the sprite for the bird itself). This fact was often taken up to indicate that, because of its short development time, *Flappy Bird* could not possibly be of quality, including in *Kotaku* editor Jason Schreier's takedown of the game. Historically and psychologically, there is a direct correlation between the perceived effort of an artistic work and how much a given observer believes it to be worth— whether or not that person is an expert—which has been called "the effort heuristic."[70] Cho and Schwartz have determined, however, that when framed as a question of talent, "low effort conditions" can imply high talent if audiences are primed to understand that high skill can result in doing creative work more

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[69] Ellis Hamburger, "Indie Smash Hit 'Flappy Bird' Racks up $50K per Day in Ad Revenue," *The Verge* (blog), February 5, 2014, https://www.theverge.com/2014/2/5/5383708/flappy-bird-revenue-50-k-per-day-dong-nguyen-interview.

[70] Justin Kruger et al., "The Effort Heuristic," Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 40, no. 1 (January 2004): 92, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-1031(03)00065-9.

quickly.[71] Therefore, it doesn't necessarily follow that just because Nguyen didn't spend a large amount of time on his game that is game is of low quality. Rather, it is in the way that the press frames that game and the value of Nguyen's labor that results in that conclusion.

Stolen Art

On February 6, 2014, the gaming news blog *Kotaku* published a piece by news editor Jason Schreier entitled "*Flappy Bird* Is Making $50,000 A Day Off Ripped Art." Schreier's argument is straightforward: more than just being inspired by Shigefumi Hino's original art for *Super Mario World*, *Flappy Bird* creator Dong Nguyen directly stole it. He attempts to corroborate this theory by juxtaposing screenshots *Flappy Bird's* pipes and those from *Super Mario World*, as well as the bird from *Flappy Bird* and enemies from *Super Mario Bros., 3*. But it's not enough for Schreier to make this claim, he also reinforces the idea that *Flappy Bird* is unworthy, writing "Most people acknowledge that it's a terrible game—which it is—and many have attempted to dissect its massive appeal."[72] The article concludes with the pessimistic sentence "let this be a life lesson: if you want to make $50,000 a day, put ripped art in a terrible game."[73] To be clear, "ripped art" does not simply imply reinterpretation or even stealing the idea, it means to directly take art from another game.

Yet the pipe in *Flappy Bird* is clearly not a direct copy, even if it is very similar to the *Mario* pipe (figure 1). Schreier eventually concedes as much in an edit to the article on February 8, writing:

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[71] Hyejeung Cho and Norbert Schwarz, "Of Great Art and Untalented Artists: Effort Information and the Flexible Construction of Judgmental Heuristics," *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 18, no. 3 (July 2008): 207, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2008.04.009.
[72] Schreier, "Flappy Bird."

[73] Ibid.

> Given that the word "ripped" can be interpreted as "lifted," I've decided to change the headline for the sake of clarity. Before scrutinizing the two pipes side by side, I believed that *Flappy Bird*'s art was directly taken from *Mario*—however, when examined, it's clear that *Flappy Bird*'s pipe is a new albeit unoriginal drawing. The similarities are apparent, as I originally noted, but "ripped" may have been too harsh a word."[74]

Though the title had been changed to the much less inflammatory "*Flappy Bird* Is Making $50,000 A Day With Mario-Like Art," the damage had already been done. Rumors of stolen art continued to circulate, and Nguyen continued to receive hundreds of death threats a day.[75] He finally decided to take *Flappy Bird* off the app store, writing "I am sorry 'Flappy Bird' users, 22 hours from now, I will take 'Flappy Bird' down. I cannot take this anymore."[76] Some news reports suggested that this was due to Nintendo filing a copyright claim against the game, an assertion that both Nguyen and Nintendo denied.[77] Nevertheless, the suggestion of lawsuits as the real reason for *Flappy Bird*'s demise continued to propagate well after it was gone. Jesper Juul writes that "All of this is nonsense, of course. In my limited legal understanding, there is nothing copyrightable about green pipes, and nothing copyrightable about a core game mechanic."[78] But it seems like the real transgression for Schreier was not a legal boundary but an artistic one, in which *Flappy Bird* represents a threat to established norms in gaming.

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[74] Ibid.

[75] Yang, "An Alternate History."

[76] Dong Nguyen, "I Am Sorry 'Flappy Bird' Users, 22 Hours from Now, I Will Take 'Flappy Bird' down. I Cannot Take This Anymore.," Tweet, *@dongatory*, February 8, 2014, https://twitter.com/dongatory/status/432227971173068800.

[77] Newley Purnell, "Nintendo: No Complaints About 'Flappy Bird,'" *Wall Street Journal*, February 10, 2014, sec. Digits, https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-DGB-32728.

[78] Jesper Juul, "There Once Was a Game Called Flappy Bird," *The Ludologist* (blog), February 10, 2014, https://www.jesperjuul.net/ludologist/2014/02/10/there-once-was-a-game-called-flappy-bird/.

We can already see one threat from the title of the article on its face. The fact that it was making "$50,000 a day" despite being a free game with no microtransactions is meant to cause alarm. This freeness becomes a threat, a way of ballooning the amount of money the game is making to enormous levels for a single developer. The barrier to entry is so low to begin playing for free games that a "meme game" like *Flappy Bird* can dominate the charts. Still, why might the success of *Flappy Bird*, even with its pedestrian graphics, be considered a threat instead of the story of a plucky underdog finding a way to succeed in a crowded marketplace? To begin to answer this question, we might look to some of the comments on Schreier's article. One reader writes, "it's solid proof that developers don't need to be creative, innovate, or even work hard to become stupidly successful." Another argues, "Everything about mobile gaming is rotten. From the developers of this tripe to the morons that buy it. Come up with crap, charge next to nothing and you'll make millions because people have no self-respect or sense of value and will buy because throwing money away is acceptable these days." In the comments section, Schreier himself writes "mobile gaming is a wasteland. Full of clones and recycled garbage, and Apple doesn't seem to care."[79] It's clear that Schreier is taking the opportunity to build on the aesthetic and ethical judgements of ripped art in order to make larger industrial judgements on the legitimacy of mobile gaming writ large.

This kind of judgment on mobile gaming is another way that the gaming press legitimizes itself as cultural mediators and sets boundaries on what counts as legitimate development and what does not. Mike Fahey, Schreier's contemporary at *Kotaku*, wrote in his review "the way I see it, iPhone owners will download anything as long as it's free and looks vaguely like a

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[79] Schreier, "*Flappy Bird*."

Nintendo game."[80] This line is operating on several ideological levels. The first is to set up the gimmick judgement; *Flappy Bird* is only successful because of its vague allusions to Mario, in Fahey's eyes. The second is to separate the mobile gaming audience as less-than. We have seen this kind of rhetoric of setting up casual audiences as marks for a gimmick before. Judgments about the gimmick of the Wii's motion controls were largely foisted on Nintendo's attempts to appeal to what Satoru Iwata called the "blue ocean" of casual gamers and families. In Kat Bailey's *USGamer* retrospective, she blames Nintendo's ostensible focus on this market for the failure of the Wii to attract quality third party developers and appeal to "core fans."[81] In this way, casual gaming is positioned as being not only culturally inferior and having worst taste, but being responsible for industry failures by falling for the gimmick and not recognizing what good games look like.

The fear of the delegitimization of the gaming industry due to the prevalence of low-quality games, in this case mobile gaming, has been part of industry discourse for decades. The video game crash of 1983, in which console game revenues fell by 97%, has often been blamed on the market saturation in the number of low-quality games such as the infamous *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* release for the Atari 2600. Recently, industry voices have expressed the fear that the proliferation of poorly-made games due to decreasing technological barriers for development and democratizing access through engines such as unity will result in the disruption of the industry—a phenomenon termed "indiepocalpyse."[82] Nicoll and Keogh link this fear to the meritocratic

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[80] Fahey, "The Most Popular App."

[81] Bailey, "Ten Years Later."

[82] Benjamin Nicoll and Brendan Keogh, *The Unity Game Engine and the Circuits of Cultural Software*, Palgrave Pivot (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 103.

culture of gaming, writing that the "hatred of democratization in videogame culture stems from a meritocratic belief that videogame development is a specialized craft that requires a certain degree of skill, knowledge, and hard work, rather than a field of cultural production that anyone can participate in."[83] So ironically, making game development more accessible and arguably leveling the playing field is often seen as an anti-meritocratic action because it discounts the intense labor required to learn how to make games in more complicated platforms and development environments. As in the case of acting as cultural mediators of quality, protecting the integrity of the industry from perceived threats and outsiders is a role that the enthusiast press is happy to fill.

Nguyen readily admits that the pipes in *Flappy Bird* are heavily inspired by the pipes from *Super Mario World*. In fact, *Flappy Bird* bears an even more striking resemblance to the French browser game *Piou Piou vs Cactus*, which also features a large-billed yellow bird flapping to avoid green obstacles (in this case cacti). But whether either is the case, I would argue that seeing borrowing visual ideas or mechanics as constituting an unacceptable form of plagiarism or even uncreative is a value judgement that is not culturally universal or even universal in the aesthetic judgement of other media or cultural goods. Much of the visual arts are built on this, including styles like pop art and collage. To this point, the specific act of appropriating sprites from *Super Mario Bros.* is itself a legitimized cultural practice. Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* (Figure 2) is a widely 2002 video installation art piece in which the artist removes all assets from the game aside from the sky and the clouds and loops their path. *Super Mario Clouds* was featured in the 2004 Whitney Biennial where it was described as "a rigorous conceptual approach to computer hard- and software as well as a refusal to

[83] Ibid., 104.

participate in contemporary culture's lightning-fast cycle of technological turnover."[84] By automatically assuming that any use of or reference to pre-existing assets is artistically bereft, the gaming press is making specific value judgements about what kinds of development needs to happen to make a successful game and what kinds of artistic statements are allowed to be made in games. In fact, what counts as creative labor is culturally and geographically dependent. The specific appropriation of *Super Mario Bros.* assets can be seen as a salient cultural commentary if the artist is given the space and legitimacy to describe their vision. It is also worth mentioning that Nguyen is developing in a specific regional context that is different from the United States, or even Japan, Korea, or China. Historically, video game development in Southeast Asia has been built on startups that were contracted by larger more established companies from the US and Japan to outsource large projects and save money. Anthony Fung argues that we need to consider this cultural context when understanding what qualifies as creative labor in regional video game industries. In his interviews with Southeast Asian developers from Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam, he notices a specific trend of creative pride in the ability to replicate the aesthetics of the Global North companies that they subcontract for, rather than in the development of a unique style that could be seen as a more creative labor.[85] I would argue that Nguyen understands his labor as being creative in a similar way.

But *Flappy Bird* need not be accepted to the Whitney Biennial in order to qualify as a game of potential quality and creativity. There are many reasons why replicating ideas from other

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[84] Whitney Museum of American Art, "Cory Arcangel | Super Mario Clouds," Whitney Museum of American Art, 2002, https://whitney.org/collection/works/20588.

[85] Michael Curtin, Kevin Sanson, and Anthony Fung, eds., "Redefining Creative Labor: East Asian Comparisons," in *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 210.

games or being inspired by their art or mechanics could be considered legitimate. Often, this is a way for designers to develop the skills needed for long-term development as a form of practice and building their own styles. John Vanderhoef has reasoned that, despite being seen as aesthetically bereft, we might consider the use of pre-made assets from repositories like the Unity store to be a form of cultural bricolage where the use of specific assets qualifies a kind of curation and artistic practice.[86] In an interview with Rolling Stone, he links his work on *Flappy Bird* to his desire to replicate both the look and feel of classic SNES games.[87] It's worth noting, as game designer Bennett Foddy does in an interview with *The Guardian*, that prestige indies that appropriate from *Mario* do not receive the same pushback. He is quoted saying:

> The art elements are no closer to Mario's actual artwork than thousands of other famous and lesser-known indie games that have been released over the past 20 or 30 years…Much of the criticism has focused on the green 'pipes' that form the barriers in Flappy Bird — those green pipes have been cultural icons for three decades. Two of the most famous works in the indie games movement, Super Meat Boy and Braid, adapt language and visual elements from Super Mario Bros for exactly this reason, and quite rightly neither one faced anything like the kind of criticism that Flappy Bird has received.[88]

Nevertheless, *Flappy Bird* received an inordinate amount of grief for using green pipes.

But apart from a lack of cultural contexts, there are also more racialized dimensions to the accusations of plagiarism experienced by Nguyen. Much of the rhetoric surrounding East and Southeast Asian labor is reduced to knockoffs and copycats threatening legitimate creative industries in the West. Long Bui argues that "The Chinese copycat that only makes foreign

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[86] John Vanderhoef, "Throwing Shit at the Wall: Maligned Aesthetics, Asset Flipping, and the Politics of Value in Informal Game Development" (Society of Cinema and Media Studies Annual Conference, Seattle, 2019).

[87] David Kushner, "The Flight of the Birdman," *Rolling Stone*, March 27, 2014.

[88] Keith Stuart, "Flappy Bird Is Dead - but Brilliant Mechanics Made It Fly," *The Guardian*, February 10, 2014, sec. Games, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/feb/10/flappy-bird-is-dead-but-brilliant-mechanics-made-it-fly.

knockoffs ties into the broader contemporary "factory imaginary" of China that sets up a novelty vs. repetition divide, slotting different kinds of work and people within the global technocultural imaginary."[89] I would argue that development work coming out of Southeast Asia, which is known at least in the industry as an economy of subcontractors, would fit into this narrative as well where Vietnamese labor is always already seen as tied to other more established developers' work. Critiques such as Schreier's feed into this narrative.

Bots and App Store Manipulation

On January 31st, 2014, blogger Carter Thomas wrote a post about how he believed that Dong Nguyen had been using bots to manipulate the App store rankings to put *Flappy Bird* and his other games to number one in the charts, allowing him to generate organic downloads and rake in ad revenue. He wrote "Looking at some of the top apps in the store by Dong Nguyen, I hate to say it, but *it looks really similar to bot activity.* Of course, I can't prove this and there are strong cases for lots of different potential growth strategies, but I do want to bring this up to engage a discussion and get industry leaders to weigh in with some analysis so that we can find out how this happened."[90] Despite framing this as "simply throwing out ideas" and emphasizing that he has no proof, Thomas continued to assert that because it had experienced an unprecedented rise in the charts, the game must be using bots in some capacity. The only evidence he seemed to provide were charts of the games becoming incredibly popular on the app store in December and January, which was already self-evident. The accusations seem unlikely in

[89] Long Bui, "Asian Roboticism: Connecting Mechanized Labor to the Automation of Work," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 19, no. 1–2 (March 30, 2020): 115, https://doi.org/10.1163/15691497-12341544.

[90] Carter Thomas, "Flappy Bird's Smoke & Mirrors – Is Something Fishy Going On? – Bluecloud," Blue Cloud Solutions, January 31, 2014, http://www.bluecloudsolutions.com/2014/01/31/flappy-birds-smoke-mirrors-scamming-app-store/.

retrospect due both to the large amount of capital Nguyen would have to obtain to clone that many bots for app store reviews, which one commenter points out would be in the tens of thousands, long before he was making such a significant amount of money off of ads.

Something noteworthy about Thomas' post is his comparison to K-pop producer and singer Psy's "Gangnam Style," writing "if it turns out that it's just a wildly viral game like Gangnam Style, my hat is off to Mr. Nguyen and I wish him the very best of luck and success."[91] I can't help but feel as though the only connection between them is that both are Asian viral hits and both are misunderstood ("Gangnam Style" did not come out of nowhere, Psy was on his sixth studio album and had a very successful career in Korea by the time he released the song). "Gangnam Style" also went viral in summer of 2012, a full year and a half before *Flappy Bird*. I noticed the unnecessary comparison to Asian media in other reviews too, with Matt Peckham saying the sound effects sounded like a "grindhouse movie karate chop"[92] and Lucy Hattersley wrote "it's impoverished to the level of the North Korean tech scene."[93] The commenters on Thomas' post also seemed to make connections between *Flappy Bird* and Asian tech culture write large. One commenter wrote "Theres a lot …and I mean a LOT of shady stuff happening in the App Store and app world. Ive been mentioning fake reviews and bots for the longest on different blogs but no one was taking my comments serious…And theres a lot more shady stuff thats going on which is happening in India, China, Korea to name a few." While I am not holding Thomas accountable for racism in the comments of his blog, it is clear that the illustrate a penchant for associating app manipulation with Asian developers.

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[91] Ibid.

[92] Peckham, "No, You Don't."

[93] Hattersley, "*Flappy Bird* review."

I would diagnose Thomas' main issue as one of jealousy. As a one-off blog post from an otherwise unimportant developer, his essay would have little impact. But his post was picked up by dozens of other. This is the same fairness narrative used to explain why it was bad that *Flappy Bird* uses Mario pipes. Also an app developer, it seems inconceivable to Thomas that a game that he considers to be bad (he originally wrote "shitty," but after some pushback from the comments section he changed it to "stupid") would be so popular and beloved by fans. He seems to be using the same fairness rhetoric we have seen to justify how his games that I'm sure he works quite hard on don't rise to the same level of prominence as a game that he sees as being bad. At the same time, this rhetoric is tinged in covert racism and personal attacks against Nguyen. Toward the end of the article, he writes "One saving grace (if he did, in fact use bots) is knowing that he's using AdMob banners and nothing else to monetize, meaning he left about $1M on the table this past week. Oops."[94] Like the rhetoric surrounding the quality of the game and the use of "Mario-like art," this quote tries to have its cake and eat it too. It simultaneously posits Nguyen as a super genius who was able to skyrocket to the top of Apple's App Store and yet too dumb to use an effective form of monetization like microtransactions or full-screen cost per click ads. This mirrors Shah's assertion that rhetoric around Asians in US culture experience "two sets of racial narratives: that Asians are smart but not capable of reason and that Asians are technically proficient but lack creativity."[95] Moreover, the politics of playing the algorithms in hopes of greater visibility are hardly established. In reality, the difference between legitimate marketing strategies and illegitimate gaming of algorithms is a nebulous gray area. To "fix" this problem, Petre et al. argue that both the platforms themselves and the press describe breaking the

[94] Thomas, "Flappy Bird's Smoke & Mirrors."

[95] Shah, "'Asians are Good at Math,'" 673.

alleged rules of algorithmic gameplay in moralistic and normative terms that makes those on the outside feel deviant, a process they call "platform paternalism."[96] So acceptable and unacceptable behaviors are more left to the politics of legibility and legitimacy than they are to breaking any specific rules or guidelines.

None of this would matter, really, if it were just a one-off blog post from an otherwise unnoteworthy developer. But as soon as Thomas' accusations were acknowledged by the gaming press they were repeated ad nauseum, despite not being substantiated in any way. His post was immediately rephrased in publications like *The Telegraph*,[97] *Newsweek,*[98] and *The Sydney Morning Herald.*[99] It also became something of an overnight sensation for two reasons. The first is that around the same time that Thomas' post was picked up in the press, Dong Nguyen announced that he was pulling the game from the App Store. This became an international news story, and large news organizations like *NPR*[100] and *The Chicago Tribune*[101] began covering it. Much of this coverage speculated that either the alleged legal trouble with Nintendo or the controversy surrounding bots could be the reason. But Thomas' blog was the only source that really alleged bot usage on the part of Nguyen, so his post was suddenly linked to dozens of

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[96] Caitlin Petre, Brooke Erin Duffy, and Emily Hund, "'Gaming the System': Platform Paternalism and the Politics of Algorithmic Visibility," *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (October 2019): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119879995.

[97] Rhiannon Williams, "Flappy Bird: 'Too Good to Be True?,'" *The Telegraph*, February 4, 2014, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/10615036/Flappy-Bird-too-good-to-be-true.html.

[98] Joe Kloc, "Is Flappy Bird Cooking Its iTunes Rank?," Newsweek, February 4, 2014, https://www.newsweek.com/flappy-bird-cooking-its-itunes-rank-228016.

[99] Ben Grubb, "The Mysterious Takedown of the Flappy Bird App," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 10, 2014, sec. Technology, https://www.smh.com.au/technology/the-mysterious-takedown-of-the-flappy-bird-app-20140210-32bje.html.

[100] Steve Mullis, "Creator Of Runaway Mobile Hit Flappy Bird Taking Game Down," *NPR*, February 8, 2014, sec. All Tech Considered.

[101] Tribune Newspapers, "Flappy Bird Grounded," *Chicago Tribune*, February 10, 2014, sec. Arts+Entertainment.

news outlets. The second reason that this narrative proliferated was that Thomas' post was used as a primary source for one of the *Reuters* articles about the event. Suddenly, hundreds of local newspapers began running the story, all of which was based on the same unsubstantiated claims. If anything, this shows that some news organizations were willing to use any source to explain *Flappy Bird*'s popularity without first checking how realistic or probable that explanation was. For the enthusiast gaming press and game devs, Thomas' post also allowed one final novel iteration of the same gimmick framework that had proliferated the entire time. When asked by *Wired* if he thought that there was any substance to Thomas' accusations, recurring character of this chapter Ian Bogost said "Who Cares? What is interesting is how desperate the game devs are for it to be fraudulent. They just cannot take the idea that this is a real thing."[102] This certainly seems to sum up Thomas' disposition, and for me it also encapsulates much of the gaming press' relationship to the *Flappy Bird* story as a whole. It is ultimately a story about regulating the norms of gaming culture and mediating both cultural and economic value for gaming commodities.

Conclusion

The reaction of the gaming press to *Flappy Bird* demonstrates the ideologies and anxieties surrounding game labor, especially when it does not conform to what is traditionally understood as good labor in terms of quality, platform, or scope. Specifically, the narratives perpetuated about *Flappy Bird* seem to correspond very specifically to the aesthetic judgment of the gimmick, which represents an anxiety about the perceived disconnect between labor-time and

[102] Ryan Singel, "The Rise and Fall of Flappy Bird," *Wired*, February 14, 2014, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/flappy-bird.

value. The fact that *Flappy Bird* is a free game complicates this dynamic because it only became visible in this way once a large number of people demonstrated a desire to download and experience the game. I do not mean to suggest that the gaming press perpetuated these narratives specifically to torpedo *Flappy Bird*. Rather, the reaction to the game seems to have risen naturally out of some of the conflicts between gaming ideologies like meritocracy, technical expertise, and fairness. As I have previously stated, one function of the gaming press as an enthusiast press is to effect and maintain the ideological structure of gaming as a community. Certainly many case studies could have illustrated this function, but *Flappy Bird* has the added benefit for this dissertation of being a decidedly free game in which the advertising revenue gathered by entirely voluntary audiences caused a huge splash. The fact that Nguyen is Vietnamese also exposes some of the double standards in the conception of labor and the inability of the press to understand or frame certain development trends and behaviors in context.

This reaction also demonstrated the complicated relationship between the press and gaming audiences. On the one hand, they had needed to explain this phenomenon that had audiences so excited. On the other, they (I think rightly) understood that *Flappy Bird* as a phenomenon did not resonate with the core gamer base that makes up both the primary audience of publications like *Kotaku* and also, especially at the time, the enthusiast press that staffs those publications and covers the gaming marketplace. So the tale of *Flappy Bird* is also the tale of reconciling popularity with the core gaming audience and explaining it in a way that resonated with them.

Looking to the future, I would be very keen on more scholarship that contextualizes the legacy of *Flappy Bird*. The game itself continues to live quite a diverse life. Despite never being

re-released to the app store, *Flappy Bird* has lived on as a battle royale,[103] an arcade cabinet,[104] a template for teaching children how to code,[105] and a mechanism for deep machine learning.[106] Importantly, for better or worse, *Flappy Bird* also completely changed the mobile game marketplace in the West and created an entirely new business strategy for gaming—that of the hyper-casual game.[107] More than just casual gaming, hyper-casual games are defined by quick, repetitive gameplay and their ad-driven model where they attempt to squeeze players for a quick fix rather than the microtransaction-driven economies of more traditional free-to-play games. Five years after *Flappy Bird*'s debut, Goldman-Sachs invested $200 million in Voodoo, the largest hyper-casual publisher by number of downloads.[108] In this way, *Flappy Bird* reinvigorated the free game model that this dissertation has been interested in from the beginning.

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[103] Ethan Gach, "There's A Flappy Bird Battle Royale Game Now, And It's Good," Kotaku, June 27, 2019, https://kotaku.com/there-s-a-flappy-bird-battle-royale-game-now-and-it-s-1835918626.

[104] Jon Fingas, "Flappy Bird Arcade Cabinet Will Empty Your Wallet in Record Time," Engadget, January 10, 2015, https://www.engadget.com/2015-01-10-flappy-bird-arcade-cabinet.html.

[105] Josh Lowensohn, "Code.Org Turning the Ashes of 'Flappy Bird' into a Phoenix of Coding Education," The Verge, February 26, 2014, https://www.theverge.com/2014/2/26/5451182/code-org-turning-the-ashes-of-flappy-bird-into-a-phoenix-of-coding.

[106] Yash Mishra, Vijay Kumawat, and K. Selvakumar, "Performance Analysis of Flappy Bird Playing Agent Using Neural Network and Genetic Algorithm," in *Information, Communication and Computing Technology*, ed. Abdullah Bin Gani et al., vol. 1025, Communications in Computer and Information Science (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 253–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1384-8_21.

[107] Matija Hanicar, "Hyper Casual Game: Mobile Gaming's Most Profitable Genre?," Udonis, October 20, 2021, https://www.blog.udonis.co/mobile-marketing/hyper-casual-game.

[108] Mathieu Rousemain and Gwénaëlle Barzic, "Goldman Sachs Invests $200 Mln in France's Voodoo -Source," *Reuters*, May 28, 2018, sec. Funds News, https://www.reuters.com/article/france-tech-voodoo-goldmansachs-idUSL5N1SZ3JH.

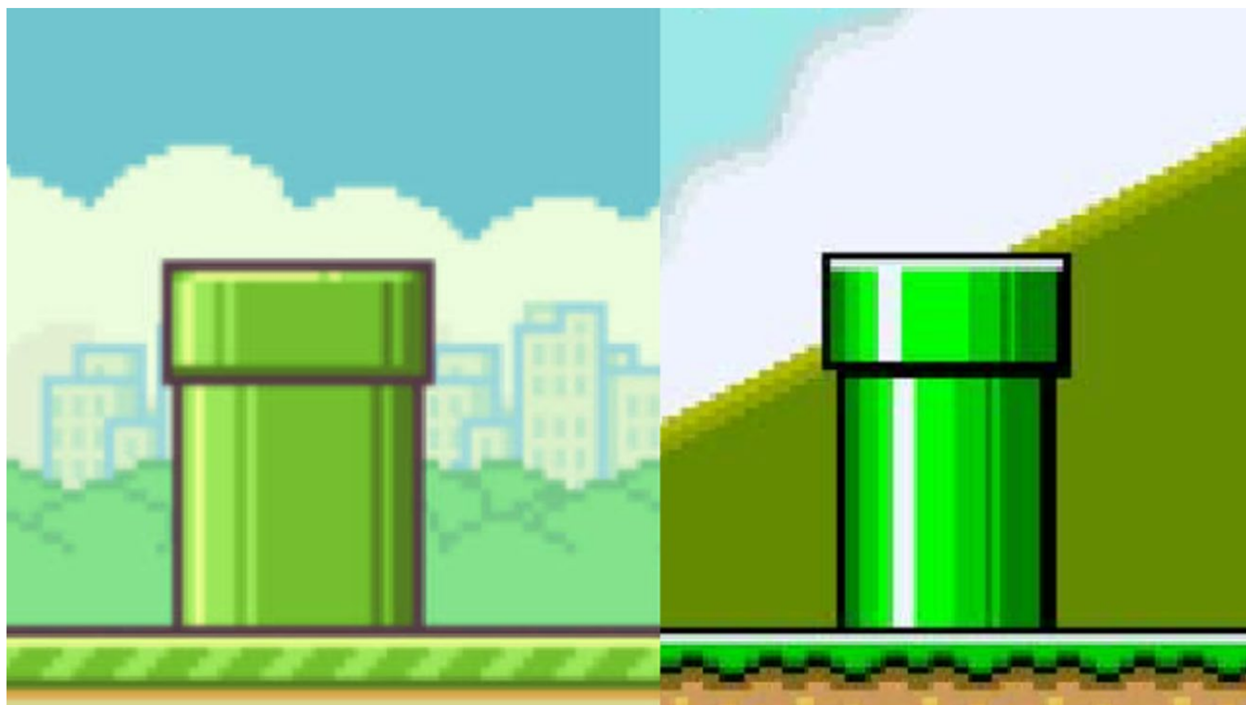

Figure 1- The comparison image from the original Kotaku article. Flappy Bird is on the left and Super Mario World is on the right.

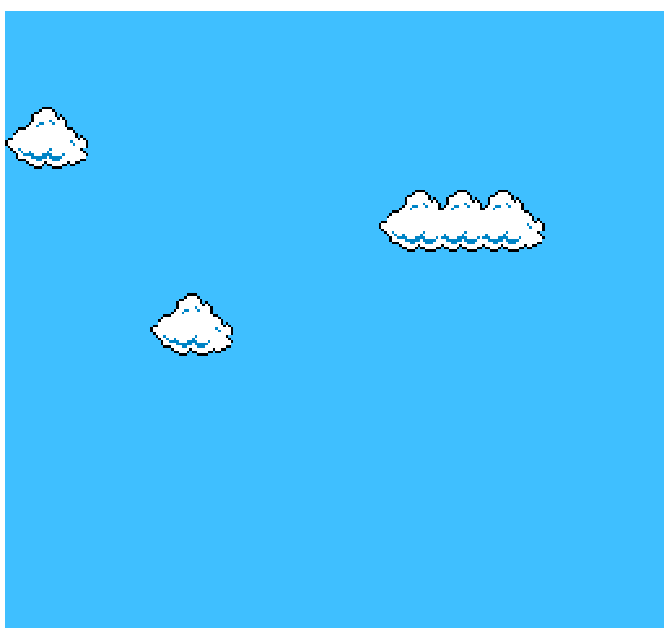

Figure 2 - Still from Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds*

Conclusion: Free Games, Free Archives

Club Penguin may have died on March 30th, 2017, but its legacy lives on. In fact, all of the games mentioned in the previous chapters have had afterlives long surpassing their original relevance. So far, I have discussed the various forms of value that are generated from the labor behind freely distributed video games. This value can change depending on the material and social circumstances surrounding this labor. In 1980s San Francisco, CM Ralph generated economic and communal value through their activist developmental labor for *Caper in the Castro*. This labor connected to a longer queer history of the use of the charityware model of distribution for political, activist purposes that predated its philanthropic use. In 1990s Philadelphia, Tom Fulp created a Neo Geo zine which would, through fits and starts, become the world's foremost flash game repository. This action enabled thousands of creators to upload their games for immediate feedback, build their skills as developers, and make money through banner advertisements. But Newgrounds was not equally welcoming to all developers, and larger structural issues of misogyny, racism, and homophobia that permeated the internet grew here as well. In England in 1999, Donna Williams and Adam Powell started a small experimental website which would soon be loved by millions of young people, bought out by an American advertiser with a knack for serving ads to children, and sold to one of the world's largest media conglomerates. Yet in this story there is space for queerness, comfort, and the discovery of identity through free labor. All over the world in the early 2010s, queer independent game developers released free games on itch.io, Steam, and their own websites. Through independent platforms, these developers gained the freedom to experiment with gaming form, distribution, and content. But the emphasis on the accessibility of queer game making may have devalued its labor. Finally, in Vietnam in 2013, Dong Nguyen released *Flappy Bird* to great, if not brief,

commercial success. His labor, however, was marginalized by Western gaming presses who made aesthetic judgements against the game to solidify their own place as tastemakers.

These stories are all historically situated in their own times and places. But they have grown into something else, namely, the continuation of game history through archiving. The resurrection of video games is nothing new and has been done repeatedly by the gaming industry and auxiliary retail industries for decades and in a variety of ways.[1] But the second lives of free online games ostensibly differ from the commodified sales or remasters of old console games. In this concluding portion of my dissertation, I will explore the preservation, archival, and reconstruction efforts of the works in the previous chapters to unpack the ways in which their legacies continue to have affective impacts on their creators and fans alike. In particular, the preservation of these games continues to stress their freeness, even as the games themselves are being re-constructed or repackaged. The methods and modes in which these games continue on are clues to their continued relevance and the value they generate for archivists and players to this day. Understanding the ways in which old video game commodities can reintegrate themselves into our lives can illustrate their utility and their political possibility. I identify two aspects of the relationship between the video game commodity and its preservation from the works discussed in my dissertation that may prove useful in the future when talking about the second lives of free games: hauntology and nostalgia.

In some ways, web games should be simple to archive. They usually require little in the way of storage and can be emulated readily. But video games are also a uniquely fragile medium, being for archiving in general, as they are, extremely dependent on specific software and

[1] James Newman, *Videogames*, 2nd ed (London ; New York: Routledge, 2013), 84.

hardware platforms. Consider, for example, the archival process of *Caper in the Castro* by the Strong's Digital Games Curator Andrew Borman. Borman received *Caper* on a floppy disk from LGBTQ Game Archive founder Adrienne Shaw in October 2017. This was already a feat, because games distributed via BBS rarely received floppy disk releases, and both *Caper* and *Murder on Main Street* were thought to be lost forever. But in order to save the game, Borman needed to revisit old technology. He explains:

> Using a piece of hardware called the Kryoflux, I was able to create a preservation copy of the disk that could then be converted into the proper image format. I also used Disk Copy on original Macintosh hardware, using native Macintosh software to create an image that was immediately accessible. After installing HyperCard, the software that was used to design the games, both titles sprang to life, perhaps for the first time since the early 1990s.[2]

This was not a particularly simple undertaking. Like most media, video game formats have something of an expiration date. Had it taken longer to find those floppy disks, or had they never existed at all, the first queer video game may have been lost to time forever. Yet unlike other museums where the revived content might only be playable in the archive or in exhibition, the Strong Museum chose to post the game for free on the Internet Archive. This move represents both a commitment to the game's original mode of distribution, and also to the public history of queer gaming.

But the urge to archive games also leads fans and scholars to develop new technologies specifically for that purpose. As Zeb Tortorici notes, archives are built on affect. The drive

[2] Andrew Borman, "Game Saves: Preserving the First LGBTQ Electronic Game," Play Stuff Blog (blog), September 7, 2018, http://www.museumofplay.org/blog/2018/09/game-saves-preserving-the-first-lgbtq-electronic-game.

toward archive must be motivated by a deeply felt urge.[3] In anticipation of the death of Flash, which finally happened in 2020, developers created new methods for archiving Newgrounds and other flash game portals not once but twice. Both methods were attempts to keep Flash games both free and playable, and to ensure that playability in the future long after Flash was taken offline. The first was Flashpoint, which was an archive of Flash and Shockwave games and animations created by Australian enthusiast Ben Latimore, also known by his online handle BlueMaxima, in 2017. Latimore describes Flashpoint as "an all-in-one archival project, museum, and playable collection of Flash games, as safe as possible from the eventual death and server shutdowns of Flash game sites."[4] The archive is available offline as a 241 gigabyte download and is essentially an emulator for over 38,000 Flash games. This was a great start and guaranteed that for at least the time being Flash games would be available after the death of the platform. This method of archiving has two risks. First, it risks being torpedoed by legitimate copyright claims, though something like this archive where everyone owns their own copyright for the most part might be more difficult to take down. Second, it provides an incomplete picture of what gaming was like at the time because of its lack of contextualization in a browser. Web history is at its most complete when the content is contextualized by the environment it existed in at the time. Luckily, a more recent project has enabled just that. The browser extension Ruffle, which was developed as an open-source project by a team of volunteers starting in 2020, has recently allowed users to once again play Flash games natively in their browser (provided they are using Firefox or Chrome). This is great news for academics hoping to study Flash games

[3] Zeb Tortorici, Sins Against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 8.

[4] Cecilia D'Anastasio, "The Ragtag Squad That Saved 38,000 Flash Games From Oblivion," Wired, February 6, 2020, https://www.wired.com/story/flash-games-digital-preservation-flashpoint/.

more contextually in their native environments. But other disciplines can also benefit from the introduction of a simple browser-based emulator. The New York Times, for example, has opened its library of interactive visualizations from the 2000s, which were built in Flash.[5] This is great news for historians, journalists, and sociologists who are interested in the decade. The desire to archive Flash games raises all boats, so to speak, and that has led to archiving other interactive web elements which were not given the same priority.

In some cases, a game was never archived, at least in the traditional sense. The tragedy of *Flappy Bird* is that it was taken from us too soon. At least, *Flappy Bird* qua *Flappy Bird* was taken from us. But there has been a persistent afterlife for *Flappy Bird* which exists not in the game itself but in its utility after the fact. The freeness and simplicity of *Flappy Bird* have turned it into almost a public commodity in the AI and coding spaces. It has been as a case study for fuzzy sets in video games and deep reinforcement machine learning and as an arcade cabinet.[6] It has also been used as first project to teach many people how to code.[7] In fact, I myself learned how to make games partially through recreating *Flappy Bird*. In every case, *Flappy Bird's* simple yet challenging gameplay and its iconic design made it a prime candidate for these continuing

[5] Nathan Yau, "NYT Flash-Based Visualizations Work Again," *FlowingData* (blog), January 10, 2024, https://flowingdata.com/2024/01/10/nyt-flash-based-visualizations-work-again/.

[6] Atakan Sahin, Efehan Atici, and Tufan Kumbasar, "Type-2 Fuzzified Flappy Bird Control System," in *2016 IEEE International Conference on Fuzzy Systems (FUZZ-IEEE)* (2016 IEEE International Conference on Fuzzy Systems (FUZZ-IEEE), Vancouver, BC, Canada: IEEE, 2016): 1578; Leonardo Thurler et al., "AI Game Agents Based on Evolutionary Search and (Deep) Reinforcement Learning: A Practical Analysis with Flappy Bird," in *Entertainment Computing – ICEC 2021*, ed. Jannicke Baalsrud Hauge et al., vol. 13056, Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021): 196; Zhixuan He, "Analysis on Deep Reinforcement Learning with Flappy Brid Gameplay," in *2022 5th International Conference on Information and Computer Technologies (ICICT)* (2022 5th International Conference on Information and Computer Technologies (ICICT), New York, NY, USA: IEEE, 2022): 95; Keith Stuart, "Flappy Bird Lands on Arcade Machine," *The Guardian*, January 12, 2015, sec. Games, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jan/12/flappy-bird-arcade-machine.

[7] Josh Lowensohn, "Code.Org Turning the Ashes of 'Flappy Bird' into a Phoenix of Coding Education," The Verge, February 26, 2014, https://www.theverge.com/2014/2/26/5451182/code-org-turning-the-ashes-of-flappy-bird-into-a-phoenix-of-coding.

projects. This legacy stands in stark contrast to the derision and attacks that plagued Dong Nguyen upon *Flappy Bird*'s popularity. Ironically, through free distribution, the very game that was accused of stealing assets and being derivative has itself been stolen and copied.

We might understand *Flappy Bird's* echoes as a form of hauntology, the present reckoning with an unattained past. Hauntology can be understood as a nostalgia for a view of the future that never happened, instead haunted by the ghosts of the past. Mark Fisher argues that hauntology is the "failure of the future."[8] It exists in the space between yearning for the past and for the future but not engaged with the present. Fisher argues that hauntology is bidirectional that which no longer exists "but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic 'compulsion to repeat,' a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern)" as well as that which "has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in shaping the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior)."[9] *Flappy Bird* fulfills both directions. This may explain why, as instructors were teaching the next generation how to code using *Flappy Bird* as an example and engineers were training AI using the game, phones that had it still installed were selling for over $100,000 on eBay.[10] Its inability to exist in the present affects both our understanding of the past and our understanding of the future.

Some commodity lives are extended through nostalgia. Svetlana Boym writes that "Nostalgia is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a

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[8] Mark Fisher, "What Is Hauntology?," Film Quarterly 66, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 16–24.

[9] Ibid., 19.

[10] Angela Moscaritolo, "Flappy Bird-Equipped iPhones Selling for $100K on eBay," PCMAG, February 10, 2014, https://www.pcmag.com/news/flappy-bird-equipped-iphones-selling-for-100k-on-ebay.

sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy."[11] The ultimate tragedy of nostalgia is longing to go back to a time to which it is impossible to return. Cultural critic and ContraPoints creator Natalie Wynn calls nostalgia "yearning for lost time."[12] Thinking with Zizek and Lacan, she notes that the drive toward nostalgia is constitutive of itself, and that it is cyclical because it can never be achieved. The lack of an object to achieve through the drive masks the real target of the drive, which is the lack itself. She argues, "you yearn for the 'good old days' *because* you lack them…you can only yearn for what you have lost. The 'good old days' are old because they are gone, and they are good because you idealize what you yearn for, and you only year for what you do not have."[13] By this logic, we might imagine the urge toward nostalgia as an impossible goal, always deferring satisfaction for the pang of looking back. The nostalgic drive to recover lost video games from childhood is a drive to recreate an affect long past. The pull to nostalgia has gotten increasingly popular for video game commodities as video game audiences have aged. Video games have only recently become objects of nostalgia as gamers who played them in their youth have begun to reflect on their childhoods.

One location where nostalgia has played a significant impact on the preservation of the game is *Neopets*. There are a few different ways in which the life of *Neopets* has been extended. One is the corporate route. From the addition of paid content in the form of NeoCash to the death of flash and a flirtation with NFTs and the metaverse, the *Neopets* website had an intense stint of

[11] Svetlana Boym, The Future of Nostalgia (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii.

[12] Natalie Wynn, "Twilight | ContraPoints," YouTube, March 1, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqloPw5wp48&t=2166s.

[13] Ibid.

extreme trend hopping and capitalization in the hopes that it could profit from a continued nostalgia for the brand. The site has since been purchased by its staff and is now self-run, having walked back on several of the cash grab attempts of the past including NFTs. But they are doubling down on the site's paid functionality, NeoCash, turning a once mostly-free website into a paid one. For example, in early 2024 the staff introduced legacy pet colors, a feature that fans have been clamoring for since the pet designs were overhauled in 2007.[14] But a once free aspect of the site became monetized, with players having to pay up to $20 per pet that they wanted to convert. This kind of archival practice feels at odds with the spirit of *Neopets* during the late 90s and early 00s. But it does fit into their new vision as appealing to millennials and zoomers who might want a taste of their childhood and now have the spending money to make that a reality. At any rate, the re-establishment of *Neopet*s as a location for gaming might be understood as what Boym would call "restorative nostalgia." "Restorative nostalgia," she writes, "stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home… Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition."[15] Instead of reworking *Neopets* for modern sensibilities or even restoring lost functionalities of the site, the Neopets team is simply attempting to revive a website which has been functionally decimated by the loss of one of its main platforms in Flash.

On the other hand, *Grundo's Café* is an attempt by *Neopets* fans to recreate the pre-Viacom site as it was in the early 2000s. They have built a fully-functioning economy, have recreated many of the original activities and functionalities of the site, and have modernized

[14] Nicole Carpenter, "Neopets Community in Delight and Discord over the Return of Original Pet Art," Polygon (blog), January 18, 2024, https://www.polygon.com/gaming/24043212/neopets-uncoverted-pets-uc-nc-pet-styles.

[15] Boym, *The Future of Nostalia*, xviii.

many of the original flash games to work in current browsers. But more than just recreating the site as it was, these users also added new functionalities to the site such as new and alternate pet colors, bonuses and events, and the ability to rename accounts and pets, that weren't found on the original site. The staff behind *Grundo's Cafe* also attempt to more rigorously control the in-game economy of the site to prevent inflation (a huge problem of *Neopets*). Because it is an imitation, the site acknowledges its own status as a vehicle for nostalgia and as a reflection of the original, while at the same time adding features and improving the economic experience for players. According to the site itself, "*Grundo's Cafe* is a free online fan-community inspired by early 2000s Neopets. Join us for fun, games, and lots of nostalgia!"[16] This acknowledgement of nostalgia and the reference to a specific point in Neopets history while at the same time attempting to improve the site and rectify issues from the past represents Boym's complementary form of nostalgia, reflective Nostalgia. For Boym, reflective nostalgia "is more oriented toward an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself… reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space… [it is] aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or, on the contrary, has been just renovated and gentrified beyond recognition"[17] *Grundo's Café* is aware that Neopets cannot be what it once was, but perhaps it can be better, with a wink and a nod toward its past. And, unlike the current iteration of *Neopets*,

Understanding the life cycle of free games, from conception and development, to distribution and play, and finally, to the archival process, ultimately contributes to our understanding of video game history and culture as a whole. While non-free games are often

[16] Grundo's Cafe, "Grundo's Cafe," Grundo's Cafe, June 25, 2024, https://www.grundos.cafe/

[17] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49–50.

immensely difficult to share freely, either because of specific hardware or software concerns or because rights holders file cease and desists against .rom libraries in an attempt to take down any emulation files, free games are generally much easier to archive due to their ubiquity and, for the most part, readiness to be played in a web browser environment.[18] This is especially true for Flash games now that Flashpoint and Ruffle have been developed. As we think about the impact of free games on the gaming industry, the internet, and culture writ large, I would encourage future scholars to consider the full lifecycle of the games, from development to distribution to play to archive. In doing so, game scholars can continue the work of unpacking the power of free games, free platforms, free labor, and free play.

[18] Ashley Cullins, "Nintendo Sues California Man for Allegedly Rigging Consoles and Pirating Games," The Hollywood Reporter, December 12, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/nintendo-sues-man-allegedly-rigging-consoles-pirating-games-1168690.

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