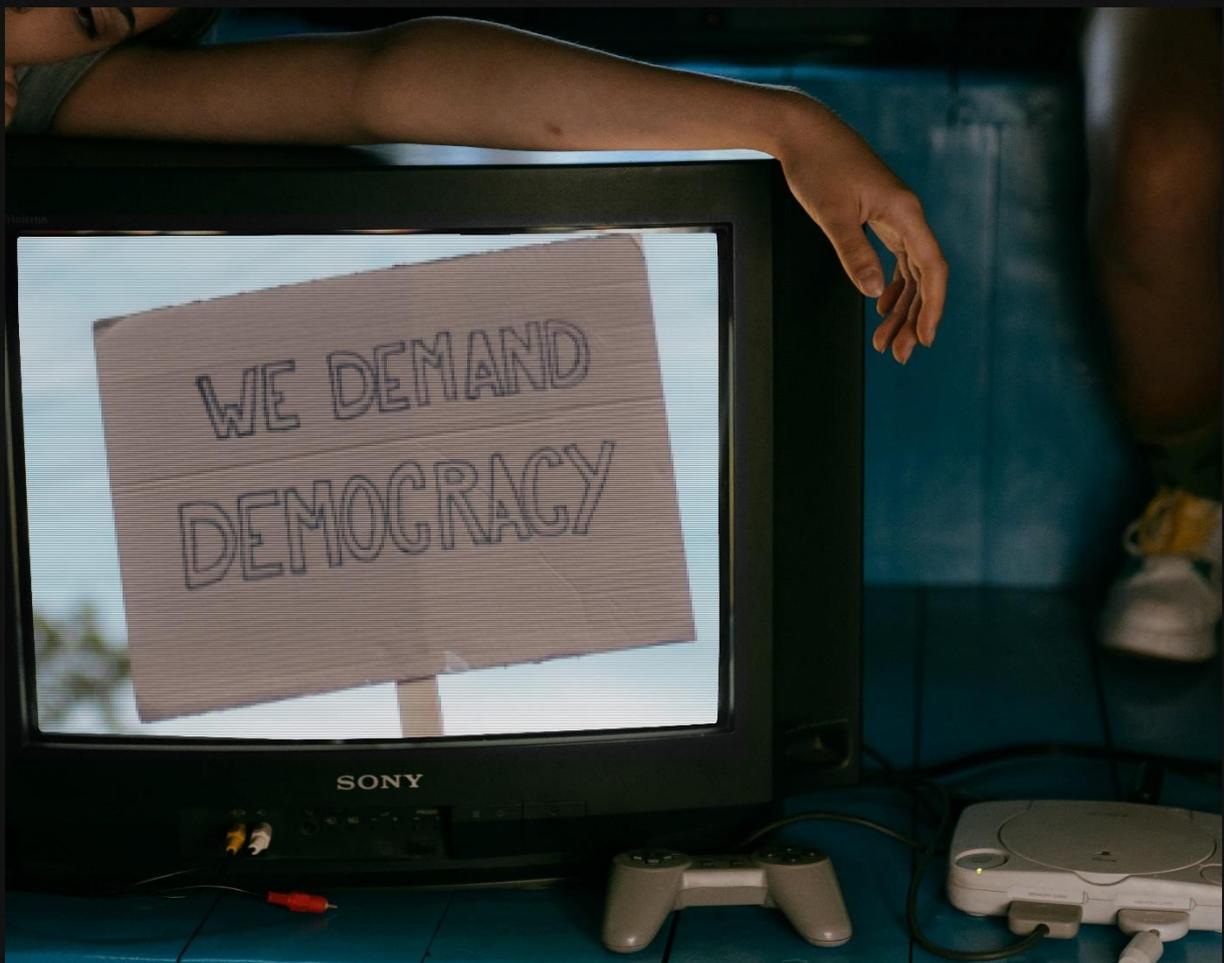


global network player authority PewDiePie god Let's Play angel undead with authentic me aratize on Sixii pvp contest
game rule system representation WoW blessing nob skills lein or face body fight experience Twitter rebirth genesis clan digital
religion game analysis The Last of Us death resurrection funeral runes virtual identity buff priest mag Xbox 360 PVE
simulation ludology narrative



Untitled. © Collage by Felix Zimmermann. Photos by cottonbro, Pexels, and Fred Moon, Unsplash.

for instance identifying the flow of foreign direct investment abroad and its effect in generating a return flow of earnings towards the US during the beginning of the Cold War. Magdoff's analysis foresaw the dynamics that would lead to the so-called Third World debt problem (Payer 1975), but also that "the professed goal of these international firms to obtain the lowest unit production costs on a worldwide basis" (Magdoff 2000, 200) and "come out on top in the merger movement in the European Common Market and to control as large a share of the world market" (ibid.). Samir Amin criticizes Lenin's view on imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism by stating that "historical capitalism has always been imperialist, in the sense that it has led to a polarization between centers and peripheries since its origin (the sixteenth century)" (Amin 2015) and Immanuel Wallerstein proposed his own alternative to Lenin's theory called 'world-systems analysis' (2004). Regardless of the development of theories on imperialism, Lenin's insights on monopoly capitalism and the core-periphery distinction is useful to identify the flows of capital with unequal exchange on global markets, debts, and inter-imperialist rivalry over natural resources and access to new markets.

Lenin's core-periphery division between oppressor and oppressed nations is useful to apply to digital games, as the "the global games industry has been dominated by companies headquartered in the United States and Japan" since the 1980s (Kerr 2017, 56), while non-US and non-Japanese competitors have had a difficult time attaining similar financial successⁱⁱ. This monopolistic tendency is evident, where for instance, Chen (2016, 180) states that "the gaming industry has become even more consolidated than previously" and "since 2010, the global gaming business has become an oligopoly in both response and effect" (Chen 2016, 191). This domination is made possible thanks to the economic and military power of nations like the US that use their power to subjugate and exploit countries in the periphery via unequal

exchange (Cope 2019, 47), as seen in the geographical transfer of surplus value between the countries in which game companies like Sony, Microsoft, Apple, Nintendo, and others operate in (Kerr 2017, 8, Chung 2016, 132). For instance, the super-exploitation of workers in the periphery is evident in the social relations objectified in the production of game consoles and phones (Smith 2016, 21–31). The games industry relies on global production networks to produce hardware like phones or game consoles that games software is executed on; to develop the software across multiple countries with lax labor regulations; to market and sell their hard- and software products in multiple markets, especially the North American, European, and East Asian ones (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and Peuter 2003). In the production chain of game hardware, the minerals needed to produce its heat-resistant electronic components are tin, tungsten, tantalum or gold (3TGs) that are usually and cheaply mined in conflict-ridden countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo through the use of slave labor (Fuchs 2014, Bulut 2020, 39–40, Valentine 2018). These minerals are smelted and refined into the electronic components that go into console and phone hardware motherboards, processors, and chips, usually in China. Here they are also assembled into the parts that make up a console or a phone and then assembled, packaged, and shipped out to distribution centers and retailers to be purchased by consumers located in affluent markets such as North America and Europe. From the mining, to the smelting and refinement, to the assembly, to the packaging and shipping, the labor is paid low wages in order to increase surplus value, often under slave-like conditions including violence and child labor (Qiu 2017). In each step of this supply chain, the required labor adds surplus value to the product that is then captured by the companies that own the production. However, the console publishers sometimes sell their hardware products at a loss in order to build up a larger install base to attain a dominant share in the market for proprietary software titles which generate the real profits afterwards (Maruyama and Ohkita

2011). Regardless of such loss-generating business models, the exploited labor in each step of hardware production adds value to the product that makes it affordable to consumers.

In the case of game software, the conventional game development is in primarily North American, European, and East Asian countries with trained white-collar labor that codes, designs, and produces game assets in a mainstream digital game (O'Donnell 2014). Increasingly the development of game software is outsourced to countries with lower wages, such as Eastern and Central European countries like Poland, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic (Ozimek 2019), as well as East Asian labor markets like Malaysia, Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, and China (Fung 2016). This outsourcing usually ranges from creating 3D assets according to specification to large-scale playable content like the side-quests in major mainstream titles (Thomsen 2018). In this view on the global production chain of the games industry, both hardware and software development result in primarily US-based companies appropriating surplus value from cheaper labor markets in the peripheries that is transferred to the imperial core.

Prominently here was the work by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's. Their monograph *Games of Empire* (2009) identified the global divisions that the games industry took part in, and more recently they proposed to include the factors of climate change, platforms, and reactionary movements (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2020). However, their theoretical foundation in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of Empire departed from previous theories on imperialism by flattening the core-periphery distinction: "*The United States does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the center of an imperialist project*" (Hardt and Negri 2001, xiv, their emphasis). As a substitute, Hardt and Negri operate with a diffused,

Google’s Play store monopolize the distribution of games in multi-sided markets (Nieborg 2016). Among other things, platforms enjoy network effects, meaning the more users a platform captures data from, the better their services and revenues are. Network effects strengthen monopolistic tendencies and result in *winner-takes-it-all* economies. This monopoly is most recently explicated in the antagonisms between Epic Games and Apple, where the former is attempting to have the latter lower their thirty percent distribution fee by taking Apple to court based on anti-trust legislation (Wikipedia 2020). This means that such platform-owners control the distribution of games and apps in such a way that they retain control over data extraction, market and sales information, while usually taking a thirty percent cut of revenue from content producers. According to Nieborg and Poell (2018), this domination of contemporary platforms results in a *platformization of culture*, where the data surveillance of users enabled by platforms has transformed games from premium single-purchase commodities to contingent cultural commodities that are modularized and changed according to a mix of data-driven game design and advertising.

In addition to these insights on platforms and cultural commodities, Dal Yong Jin (2015) explicates the ways that these platforms are owned and operated by companies based in the US who are only beholden to US corporate law and divert power and profits towards the US economy. The proliferation of US-based platforms like the iOS store and the Play store in other countries therefore means that other nation-states do not have a say in how these platforms operate, while also having their data extracted by and benefiting US companies. Jin’s analysis identifies the capture of value from the data from non-US consumers and institutions that flows towards the US, i.e. a specific form of platform imperialism. In the analysis of games and platforms, Nieborg, Young and Joseph (2020) have developed Srnicek’s and Jin’s

privileged segment of workers who thereby became invested in the English ruling classesⁱⁱⁱ. This bribing of domestic classes was perhaps best encapsulated by the British colonialist Cecil Rhodes in 1895 as quoted by Lenin:

“In order to save the forty million inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced in the factories and mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.” (Lenin 2017, 94)

Similar to how Engels wanted to explain the conservatism and lack of revolutionary potential of the English working class, Lenin would later adopt the concept of labor aristocracy to account for why the European working classes had not overthrown the ruling classes and prevented World War 1, something they had promised fifteen years prior (Lenin 1959, Hobsbawm 1970). Lenin sought to explain why European workers had supported their own bourgeois governments in marching to war and by being slaughtered by or killing workers from other countries. Like Engels’ observation of England attaining a global monopoly, Lenin’s analysis of imperialism identified how workers in the imperial European countries were bribed to be complacent and ultimately part of the prevailing system. This means that these classes did not hold revolutionary capacity, and that made it difficult, if not impossible, to overthrow the ruling classes in the imperial core countries.

The labor aristocracy theory as advanced by both Engels and Lenin has been picked up by Eric Hobsbawm (1970), Martin Nicolaus (1970), J. Sakai (2014), and most recently Zak Cope (2015, 2019). Cope (2019, 140) argues that contemporary forms of racism and chauvinism between racialized people and nations are the results of material relations. Workers in the imperial core are dependent on national and racial privilege and therefore hold a material investment in the racialized division between

Western countries and those in the so-called Global South. As Smith's (2016, 230) analysis also affirmed, the super-exploited labor results in higher wages to those workers in the imperial core and therefore they are materially motivated to maintain the imperialist exploitation of those *non-Western* workers, similar to the skilled English workers in Engels' analysis.

Gamer Aristocracy

While Engels and Lenin were primarily focused on workers, I also refer to consumers, specifically consumers of digital games. The relevance of the labor aristocracy theory for understanding this group is apparent in how they largely benefit from 21st century imperialism (Jong 2020, 16). In their report, the Tricontinental Institution (2019) uses the categories of variable capital and surplus value to calculate the labor costs if an iPhone X was produced according to US wages rather in a Chinese Foxconn factory. Their report shows that the price of an Apple iPhone X would in 2019 have been around 30.000 USD if manufactured in the imperial core countries with their higher wages and overhead costs. Inversely, this means that in today's economic conditions of 21st century imperialism, Apple's rate of exploitation of workers in the Global South assembling an iPhone X is 2458 percent (ibid.). This comparison similarly applies to game consoles and PC hardware that would similarly be expensive and largely unaffordable if produced with labor paid at imperial core salary levels, meaning that such devices are made cheaper thanks to super-exploitation in the production chain from the DRC and China (Fuchs 2016).

Likewise, in the comprehensive literature on the labor conditions of developing digital games (Kerr 2017, Bulut 2018, 2015, de Peuter and Young 2019), the people who design and code the digital entertainment that consumers enjoy are highly

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