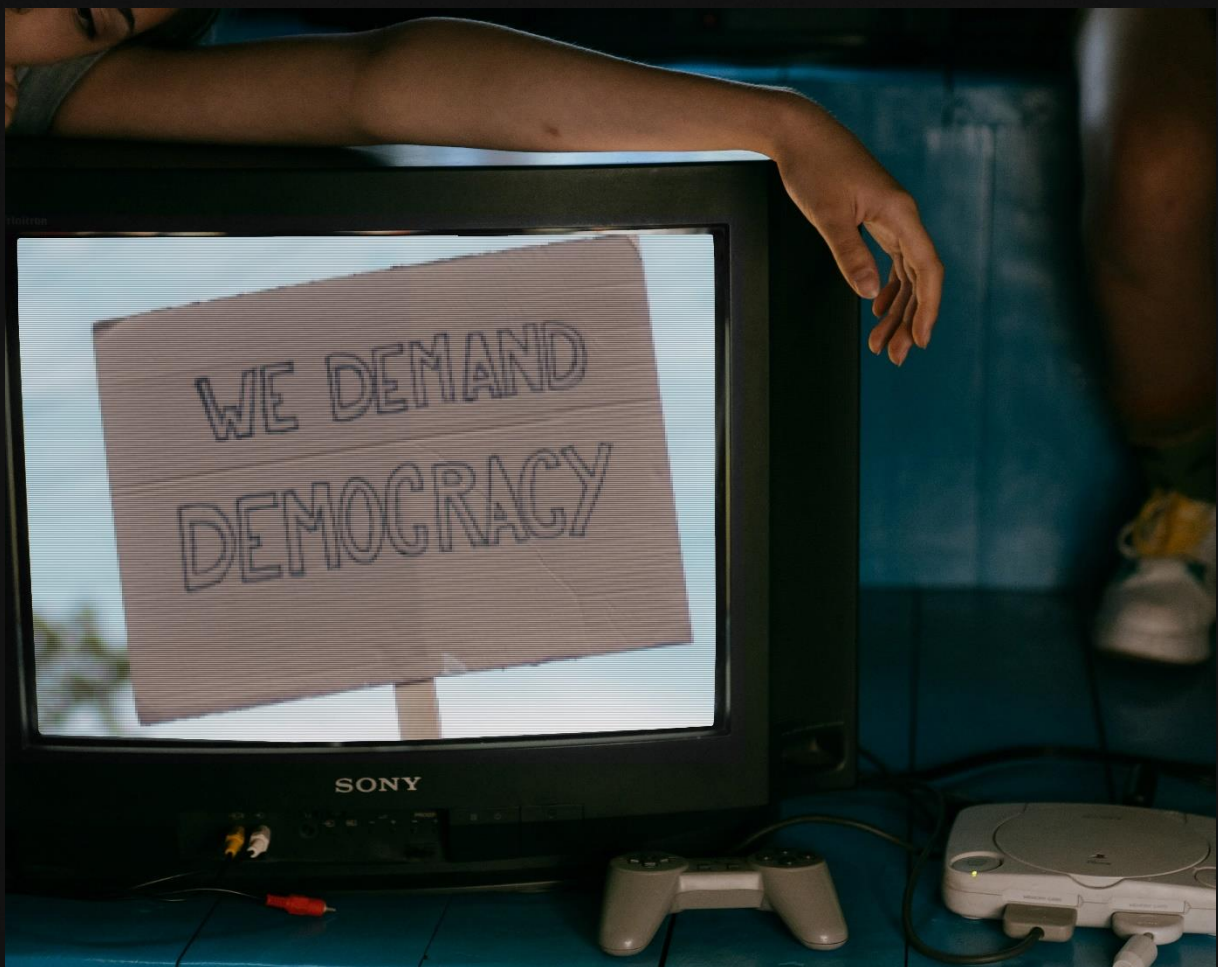


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# Imperialism and Fascism Intertwined. A Materialist Analysis of the Games Industry and Reactionary Gamers

Emil Lundedal Hammar

### Abstract

This article paves way for a materialist analysis of the games industry as 21<sup>st</sup> century imperialism that is economically and culturally structured to cultivate anti-democratic norms that lead to fascist movements against those who question or seek to change the status quo. While much research has studied the politics of reactionary movements in gaming cultures, few have paid attention to the relation between the games industry as part of an imperialist economic system, the chauvinistic ideals symptomized in their cultural products, and the reactionist consumer audiences they attract and cultivate. As I argue, the economic structure of the industry as 21<sup>st</sup> century imperialism leads to perpetual anti-democratic crises that are maintained by reactionary forces that cultivate, attract, and form fascist grassroots organization. To conceptualize this dynamic, I invoke the *labor aristocracy* theory as suggested by Friedrich Engels and V.I. Lenin. This theory helps highlight the material basis from which consumers of digital games are *bribed* to become ideologically aligned with the chauvinism that the imperialist nature of the games industry is justified by. I also invoke W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of a *public and psychological wage* to highlight the chauvinistic tendencies that the games industry cultivates via their products and marketing, in which the lack of democratic and equitable representation provides the reactionary consumers a sense of superiority. Together, these approaches account for the economic and cultural bases of both the games industry and its reactionary consumers. By anchoring my analysis in critical theories on imperialism and race, the article identifies the root causes of organized harassment and chauvinism in game cultures, as well as how the industry as 21<sup>st</sup> century imperialism benefits from and is protected by these forces of reaction.

**Keywords:** Political Economy, Marxism, Imperialism, Fascism, Masculinity, Colonialism, Whiteness, Labor Aristocracy, Exploitation, Wages Of Whiteness, Monopoly Capitalism, gameenvironments

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the growth of consumption domestically serves as what John A. Hobson (2010, 76) called the “taproot of Imperialism.” The point of this observation is that imperialist expansion in the broad sense was just as much a part of the capitalist system as the search for profits itself, so that capitalism and imperialism are considered inseparable. Hobson analyzed how European empires in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century enjoyed the imperial domination and subjugation of the world (Cope and Ness 2016, 1052), from which early Marxist theories on imperialism, usually attributed to V. I. Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Nikolaj Bukharin, developed. Lenin defined imperialism as the completed colonial division of the world from which *monopoly capitalism* arose, meaning that finance and large industry merged together beyond conventional competitive capitalism<sup>i</sup> (Lenin 2017). This division of the world and the rivalry between large monopolistic economies led to inter-imperialist rivalries over “the exclusive control over raw materials and tighter control of foreign markets that arose out of the globalizing conditions of the monopoly stage of capitalism” (Foster 2002) and ultimately the First World War. Lenin identified how capitalism was at its monopoly stage with a vast concentration of wealth, the rise of finance capital, the necessity of militarism for capitalism’s well-being, and finally the domination and exploitation of weak nations (Lenin 2017, 26). Imperialism benefits from exporting capital abroad that achieves high profits because of a high rate of exploitation through debt, plunder, and unequal exchange on the global market. This results in the former’s dependency on the latter (Smith 2016, 107), which means that imperialist economies effectively exist as parasites leeching off the labor of workers in peripheral economies. John Smith (2016, 230; 2018) terms this level of exploitation of the surplus value generated by workers in the Global South as *super-exploitation*.

Other political economists have since joined and expanded on Lenin’s theory on imperialism (Wallerstein 2004, Lauesen 2016, Amin 2018) with Harry Magdoff (2000)





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



concludes based on his analysis of the divided global strata that those in the imperial core have a vested, material interest in the continued super-exploitation and they do not necessarily have the political capacity to overthrow a system that they materially benefit from (Cope 2019, 133). As I note later, this observation is crucial to understand the dynamics of reactionary gamers, and for the purpose of clarification, *labor aristocracy*.

Engels introduced the term *labor aristocracy* to account for the conservatism and counterrevolutionary tenets in the English working class and its unions between 1845 and 1885. He was particularly motivated by the question of why workers had capitulated to the British ruling classes. The answer, he found, was that the English working class had

“[...] to a certain extent shared the benefits of the monopoly. These benefits were very unequally parceled out amongst them; the privileged minority pocketed most, but even the great mass had at least a temporary share now and then. And that is the reason why since the dying-out of Owenism there has been no Socialism in England.” (Marx and Engels 2010, 301)

Engels answer was that England had attained a global industrial monopoly due to the abolition of the Corn Laws (Marx and Engels 2010, 295). The economic benefits stemming from this free trade regime were unequally divided among the English people with two sections of the working class – namely factory workers and skilled workers who were predominantly adult men profiting the most, thereby excluding the labor competition from women, children, immigrants, and machinery work (Nicolaus 1970). Thus, the skilled workers formed an aristocracy that provided them “a relatively comfortable position” (Marx and Engels 2010, 299). England’s global industrial monopoly meant that its surplus profits “from its domination of world industry and its colonial supremacy” (Foster, Clark and Valle 2020) resulted in surplus wages for the

















developing games and the emotional and domestic labor conferred upon the women at home. As Bulut aptly points out, *working for free* in order to e.g. *crunch* rests on the *hidden* unpaid labor by women at home and the cheap, industrial labor in the peripheries. The patriarchal dimension of capitalism and the super-exploitation of workers in the Global South enables the privileged labor force in Bulut’s ethnographic investigation to commit to their labor of love and work for free (Bulut 2020, 42). Again, this contingent of the workforce would more directly conform to Engels’ labor aristocracy since their wages are reliant on the super profits made from the labor in the peripheries, but further analysis would require empirical data on the differences in salaries between core and peripheral labor.

Thus, based on the representation within games, the discursive hierarchy in the cultures around games, and the industry and academia itself, I claim that the landscape provides a sort of public and psychological wage for consumers and developers who are white, male, heterosexual and Anglophone. As Jong points out;

“The violent backlash directed at marginalized people in games, academia, and elsewhere can be understood as an attempt to protect the exploitative and unequal world system created by capitalism in the face of growing resistance from oppressed populations around the globe.” (Jong 2020, 20)

The ludopolitical regime of representation in games and the affordable luxury commodities enabled by 21<sup>st</sup> imperialism serve as a form of bribe for consumers to become invested in the status quo. Like labor aristocratic workers aligning themselves with the British ruling classes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, today’s consumers hold a material investment in maintaining 21<sup>st</sup> century imperialism that grants them *wages of gaming*.













ruling classes enjoyed the complacency and reactionary chauvinism of skilled English workers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so do the ruling classes in the games industry and the organized reactionary movements implicitly complement each other in upholding anti-democratic suppression.

Overall, a Marxist account of both the games industry and the reactionary elements in the consumer group reveals the material and cultural basis on which they cultivate and thrive to dominate, harass, and oppress those who seek to change the status quo. Indeed, following Poulantzas' aforementioned dictum: In order to understand fascism, we must understand imperialism. As such, I have described the relations between imperialism and fascism in and around digital games in order to more fully describe the root causes of organized harassment campaigns, white techno-masculinity, and general chauvinism that permeates the games industry, its products, and its cultures of consumption.

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