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## Special Issue

## Democracy Dies Playfully. (Anti-)Democratic Ideas in and Around Video Games

edited by

Eugen Pfister, Tobias Winnerling and Felix Zimmermann



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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 21st 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, gamevironments

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Throughout the last decade, a handful of very aggressive enthusiast groups around digital games have given rise to organized backlashes against those who have criticized digital games for their dominant politics, such as representational inequities of marginalized groups (Sarkeesian and Cross, 2015) or game developers who speak up about their work conditions (de Castell and Skardzius, 2019). From the online harassment of marginalized groups (Salter 2018) to review bombing of games with progressive norms (Klepeck 2018), a sizeable contingent of self-proclaimed gamers actively wants to maintain an anti-democratic status quo and suppress those who dares criticize it. At the same time, larger game companies and publishers have tried to ignore these reactionary anti-democratic movements time and time again, presumably to avoid controversy and not incur financial losses. In order to properly address these reactionary dialectics in digital game culture, this article's task at hand is to identify the root causes of this reactionary grassroots organization and the games industry's complacency.

Previous analyses of reactionary gamers have largely focused on cultural and affective factors as seen in intersectional, feminist, queer, and anti-racist analysis (Chess and Shaw 2016, Massanari 2017, Salter and Blodgett 2012 and 2017). These insightful studies have undoubtedly identified the ways that whiteness (Gray, Buyukozturk and Hill 2017), heteronormativity (Butt and Apperley 2016), and masculinity (Condis 2018, Taylor and Voorhees 2018) intersect and reproduce prevailing anti-democratic hierarchies.

Alongside recent Marxist analysis of reactionary gamers by Carolyn Jong (2020), I intend to complement these existing accounts with a materialist point of reference embedded in theories on imperialism and race. My approach to the topic of these reactionary movements in games is motivated by Nicos Poulantzas in his adjustment



of Horkheimer's famous dictum on fascism that "he who does not wish to discuss *imperialism* [...] should stay silent on the subject of fascism" (Poulantzas 2018, 17, his emphasis). I find traditional theories on imperialism (e.g., Foster 2019) productive to pinpoint the global stratification of labor and flows of capital between parasitic nations and globally exploited labor, because this also reveals the material basis from which chauvinism and bigotry arise. In the context of digital games, because the games industry relies on the global stratification of labor between the so-called Global North and the Global South, this economic domination reflects if not produces cultural and chauvinistic attitudes between the exploiters towards the exploited. If we are to fully understand the root causes of organized reactionary movements in digital games, we need to account for the materialist base that different classes benefit from and how this material base reproduces the proliferation of sexism, racism, etc. in digital game cultures that further justifies the global stratification of labor. As Jong (2020, 20-21) argues,

"the racism and chauvinism already evident in the culture surrounding games and academia [...] is connected to the global division of labour. 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."

Like Jong's analysis, I rely on theories on imperialism and racialization to draw attention to the material base of the games industry and to how organized reactionary movements maintain the anti-democratic status quo. Most importantly, my approach highlights the interests and priorities of the games industry in attracting and cultivating this contingent of reactionary movements. By proposing Marxist optics to analyze the reactionary phenomena of gamers and the games industry, I connect the industry's and reactionary gamers' mutual dependency and reproduction. The industry actively cultivates, produces, and attracts consumer identities who enjoy



or benefit from global inequalities between core and periphery nations. In turn, the industry benefits from this group of reactionary gamers when they harass, dominate, exclude, and/or silence those who destabilize or criticize the status quo. I propose that the economic and cultural hierarchy of the global stratification of labor that the games industry profits from and the chauvinistic inequalities in the games themselves, their marketing, and the structure of their workforce produce, cultivate, and attract a reactionary contingent of consumers. Due to the gendered and racialized hierarchies reflected in the digital games themselves, as well as to the affordable luxury commodities enabled by the global stratification of labor, this group of consumers becomes invested in the status quo and therefore seeks to maintain and stabilize it. In this sense, reactionary gamers benefit from the industry's chauvinistic offerings on a material and cultural level, and the industry benefits from reactionary movements in harassing workers and journalists to fall into line (Keogh 2018; Polansky 2018). I do not rely on any empirical studies of gamers and the industry, but I propose an analytical approach founded in Marxist theory that identifies the material causes for reactionary dialectics. As such, I analyze the material and cultural relations between reactionary gamers and the games industry as part and parcel of 21st century imperialism. This then helps identify the material basis that gives rise to the anti-democratic fascist movements we see surface whenever critics face backlash for questioning or destabilizing the prevailing status quo.

## The Games Industry as 21st Century Imperialism

Imperialism must not simply be understood in its territorial sense (i.e., the conquest of land), but rather in political-economic terms, meaning the cultural, economic, and military domination of one nation over another. Capitalism's drive to find remunerative investments in other markets when the growth of production exceeds

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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 (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)



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 coreperiphery 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 success<sup>ii</sup>. 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

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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 heatresistant 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,



intangible version of Empire that *multitudes* could somehow resist (Hardt and Negri 2001, 399). Indeed, following the end of the Cold War, many scholars have assumed that nation-states are no longer important actors in the expansion of capital (Foster 2002, 2019). Yet, by following theories on imperialism with its distinction between core and periphery applied to the games industry, we notice that in the laborintensive circulation of commodities in the form of game hardware and software, the geographical pattern shows that companies located in North America and East Asia are the ultimate benefactors of the surplus value generated by the involved labor power in the production process. The companies that profit from extracting conflict minerals, those that own the smelters and refineries, and those that own the factories where the games hardware is assembled, and finally the major hardware companies like AMD, Nvidia, Intel, Sony, Microsoft, Nintendo, Apple, Samsung, and so forth are those conglomerates that profit from the circulation and sales of hardware commodities. This means that the workers involved in this production chain are exploited with their created value going towards Western, Northern and East Asian countries, what Amin (2015) refers to as the Triad of monopoly capitalism.

Increasingly, it is key to identify how information and knowledge is part of this international division of labor, with intellectual property, data surveillance and extraction being primarily centered in the imperial core (Fuchs 2016). This trend is especially noticeable with the advent of platform capitalism (Srnicek 2016) and platform imperialism (Jin 2015). Platform capitalism refers to the increasing domination of platforms such as Google Alphabet, Facebook, Siemens, Uber and AirBnB, who uses data surveillance to extract information about users which in turn is used to optimize platform services and advertising for the explicit purpose of increasing the platform-owner's profits. Srnicek's characterization of platforms similarly applies to digital games where distributors such as Apple's iOS store or



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



insights into how the revenue of game apps on major US-based platforms end up benefiting US-based companies that dominate and extract money from other countries' cultural production, such as Canada and their cultural policies. These contemporary insights mean that analyses of 21<sup>st</sup> century imperialism likewise must pay attention to the hierarchical division of information, data surveillance, extraction and digital distribution that privileges the core countries and their economies and puts those in the periphery at a continuous disadvantage (cf. Kwet 2019, Couldry and Mejias 2018).

Given this formulation of 21<sup>st</sup> century imperialism as a core-periphery division, where companies, platforms, and countries located in the imperial core benefit and superexploit labor and data in the periphery, it is possible to state that the games industry operates in similar fashion with its appropriation of surplus value in the peripheral countries thanks to the primarily US-based economic, cultural, and military domination of the world. I now proceed to outline how this division of the world is used to bribe social groups within the core economies.

## **Labor Aristocracy Then and Now**

In order to justify the exploitative division between imperial core and peripheral countries, the former dehumanize the latter. Zak Cope (2015, 2019) shows that those in the imperial core employ chauvinism and racism to justify and conceal the plunder of those who are super-exploited. The contemporary world system is one where predominantly white people in the imperial core enjoy the fruits of imperialism off the backs of predominantly people of color who work under slave-like conditions and in deep precarity in order to produce the cheap commodities that those in the imperial core enjoy (Cope 2015, 62), such as affordable game consoles. Cope



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



privileged segment of workers who thereby became invested in the English ruling classes<sup>iii</sup>. 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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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precarious and exploited to the benefit of shareholders, investors, and corporate executives (Woodcock 2019). Game developers in the US, Canada, the UK, and Europe experience crunch and so-called death marches, lack of compensation for overtime, high burn-out rates, and a prevailing sexist and racist hierarchy within game studios (Johnson 2018, Bulut 2020, Srauy 2019). This means that those who produce both hardware and software commit additional unpaid work hours for exploitation. Recently we have witnessed a growing organization of game developers in the imperial core with much wider public engagement with issues of labor conditions for western game developers (Woodcock 2019, Ruffino and Woodcock 2020). But the fact remains that game developers in the larger studios are not democratically structured or unionized and suffer from precarious and grueling work conditions. With such anti-democratic conditions within the imperial core, and the largely underinvestigated conditions at outsourcing studios in the peripheries, this economic constellation provides consumers with relatively cheap and affordable gaming hardware and software products for entertainment and leisure. From the welldesigned and high-quality consoles and phones with their electronic components fitted neatly together as small as possible (Gordon 2019), to the expansive virtual environments with their intricately detailed character models and animations in highly rendered resolution in digital games (Nieborg 2011), imperialist capitalism makes these pleasurable objects possible and affordable (Bulut 2020). Moreover, according to Smith (2016) and Cope (2019), not only does imperialism enable cheaper commodities, but also the super-profits do in fact benefit countries in the imperial core via taxes and wages of those working for the imperialist companies. It is also possible to point out that many game developers in core economies likewise are paid with the super-profits made by their employers, but I do not have the required salary data to conduct such an analysis of a labor aristocracy among game workers. However, these insights mean that these luxury commodities and super-profits



stemming from the games industry's exploitation of the peripheral countries provide the material basis for building a gamer aristocracy among consumers. Because this contingent of consumers benefit from imperialism, they are likewise prone to maintain and defend the status quo.

Before expanding on how the gamer aristocracy defend the status quo, I now turn to identify how the games industry justify imperialism in and around digital games cultures. Inspired by Du Bois' identification of the hierarchical superiority between social and racialized strata, I likewise analyze how the gamer aristocracy is cultivated by the games industry's anti-democratic norms such as racism, sexism, and ethnonationalism in their products, marketing, and structuring of workers in the industry. I return to what this means for cultivating the reactionary components of the gamers and maintain the status quo later when I combine both material and cultural investments into 21st century imperialism.

## **Wages of Whiteness**

Increasingly frustrated with the lack of solidarity by white workers with black and Chinese workers in 19th century USA, Du Bois wrote (2013, 23) that whiteness – the social, cultural, material position of having white skin with European descent – provided a "a public and psychological wage" (2013, 626) that is a variable articulation of affective life, state recognition, and material benefit. Despite being oppressed as workers by their bosses, the white US workers received a form of wage by virtue of their skin color that resulted in them enjoying the racial hierarchy that oppressed black people. This wage ranges from everyday opportunities where media recognition and access to public spaces was privileged for white people across their social class, to legal recognition of their individual civil liberties as white people, to a



material benefit from being paid more (or at all) compared to black or Asian slaves and workers. Du Bois recognized that these racialized benefits meant that white workers became invested into the white supremacist hierarchy and therefore were less likely to organize and act in democratic solidarity with racially oppressed groups. Indeed, following Du Bois, whiteness studies have concerned themselves with how ruling classes have constructed and employed racialization to divide and suppress organizational movements (Allen 2006, Ignatiev 1995) and suppress democratic potentials. Via a psychoanalytic frame, David Roediger (2007) transposes this insight to refer to how whiteness conjures on white working classes a wage that lets them ignore the labor exploitation in exchange for a position in the social hierarchy above black people. This notion of a wage operates similarly to Engels and Lenin's different formulations of labor aristocracy in the sense that a somewhat exploited group of people is bribed to maintain the prevailing system. This, as DuBois pointed out with white workers, leads to an affective and material investment into how identity markers like race, gender, sexuality, language and nationality are valued or marginalized, something which is also highly relevant to digital games.

## Wages of Gaming

I now transpose Du Bois' observation that a dominant position within an antidemocratic social hierarchy functions as a form of bribe into the discussion on contemporary digital games. Scholars generally agree that in digital games, Anglophone white heterosexual men dominate representation, the popular discourse surrounding them, and the industry itself (Fron et al. 2007). Within the games themselves, general representation of identity markers conforms to whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and Anglocentrism. On both a qualitative and quantitative level, American white male characters are most likely to be represented



in games (Williams et al. 2009, Bailey, Miyata and Yoshida 2019) and in prominent, dominant positions over others (Brock 2011, Malkowski and Russworm 2017, Hammar 2019, Shaw 2015, Murray 2017). While there may be outliers in this regime of representation, the fact remains that these are the dominant trends. This is evident on a quantitative level where white male characters again dominate the distribution of representation in games. For example, older studies confirm that white male characters take up most of the representation, while more recently, in the analysis of the top 10 selling games each year between 2001 and 2018, Bailey, Miyata and Yoshida (2019) showed that none of them featured a female protagonist, while 69 percent were men and the remaining 31 percent non-gendered identities. My own recent study shows how US white men also dominate the landscape of historical representation in an analysis of 269 different mainstream historical digital games (Hammar 2020). Meanwhile, other regions and nationalities are rarely represented, especially from South Asia (Mukherjee 2017) and Africa (Bayeck, Asino and Young 2018). If these nations are represented, they are often orientalized as antagonists (Höglund 2008, Šisler 2008, Harrer and Pichlmair 2015). This means that the representation in games often maps onto the imperialist division of the world with primarily pro-American depictions of war and conflict, most evident in the industry's shift to depictions of modern warfare and West Asian nationalities following 9/11 2001 and Hollywood's pivot to racist Arab stereotyping (Shaheen 2012). As such, players who match up to the dominant identity markers in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality, are affectively and symbolically reflected in the entertainment they consume. Via this consumption, some within this privileged group form up the gamer aristocracy in the sense that games provide a material and cultural bribe that motivates them to be invested in the status quo.

Such wages of gaming are further compounded by the fact that the cultures in which games are received and interpreted are largely dominated by whiteness and masculinity (Fron et al. 2007, Gray 2014). While the demographic distribution of who plays games is significantly diverse (Kafai, Cook and Fields 2010), especially regarding gender divisions among genres (Yee 2017), the gatekeepers and leaders in gaming cultures are largely white and male (Taylor and Voorhees, 2018). For example, US and UK gaming media has a history of heterosexual masculinity in their printing magazines during the 80s and 90s (Kirkpatrick 2017, Morrissette 2020, Behm-Morawitz 2017) with most of the key staff, editors, and executives being headed by white men (Cote 2020, Chess 2017). Industry presentations and marketing follow a similar trajectory, while game studies itself has facilitated similar tendencies by having white men as the most cited and stable scholars (Phillips 2020, Vossen 2018, Mejeur, Butt and Cole 2020). Finally, within the games industry itself, white heterosexual men are also in the majority, as both IGDA surveys (Edwards et al. 2014, Weststar and Legault 2015, Weststar, O'Meara and Legault 2018) and more recent academic analysis confirm (Bailey, Miyata and Yoshida 2019). Ergin Bulut (2020) uses social reproduction theory to conduct a materialist investigation of love and labor in game development in order to identify how for example developers enjoy and *love* working on games. Like consumers enjoy the benefits of super-exploited labor in the periphery, so do game developers enjoy the global labor that allows them to pursue their dream as game developers who create fun experiences, as I argued in the labor aristocracy section. As Bulut's ethnographic research shows, this labor of love is only possible through super-exploited workers in the global south, as well as through social reproduction of patriarchal values at home that enables primarily male developers to work overtime, while their partners take up the unpaid, domestic labor needed to support the game worker when he returns home from crunching on a game. In this sense, Bulut distinguishes between the techno-masculine subjects



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*.

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## **Gamer Aristocracy as Anti-Democratic Forces of Reaction**

I have in the above considered how the material and affective investment into the games industry helps perpetuate chauvinistic myths that enthusiast gamers employ to maintain the status quo. They form a gamer aristocracy benefiting from well-made, top-of-the-line electronic hardware packed into a relatively tiny box (e.g., a phone or a console) that is – for them – relatively affordable. At the same time, they enjoy an expansive, technologically advanced virtual rendering of entertainment that is predicated on exploited labor both in the imperial core and the peripheries. Together, gamer aristocracy and its cultural wages refer to the processes that enthusiast consumers undergo as a result of the structural properties of the games industry as 21st century imperialism and white supremacist, patriarchal demographics in the games, around them, and in the production and study of them.

This means that any threat to the existing order is a threat to those who enjoy this wage and global privilege. Because consumers of games benefit from the fruits of the international division of labor with its massive global inequalities between core and periphery, some consumers will likely also strive to maintain the super-exploitation of the Global South and the exploitation of game developers in the imperial core, and the racialized, gendered hierarchy in and around games. Because they belong to a gamer aristocracy and receive its wages, the reactionary segments of gamers defend the state of affairs against those who questions, criticizes, or destabilizes the reigning order. For example, if a journalist covers the topic of conflict minerals, they are met with hostility and silencing online, and possibly censure by the publishers themselves. Similarly, when game developers and journalists try to address the harsh working conditions, they are likewise met with ridicule and silencing within the industry, and from reactionary gamers (Keogh 2018). Perhaps most notably, the organized harassment of women, people of color, and queerfolk is a highly visible example of



how the status quo must be defended by the gamer aristocracy at all costs (Mortensen 2018). In a sense, what the reactionary contingent of consumers desire is an undisturbed continuation of the way their *bourgeois gaming gardens* are undisturbed from the continuing societal crises (Joseph 2013). This conservative affect is most evident in the defense of companies from feminist and anti-racist criticism, where gamers defend and champion huge corporations because they are affectively and materially invested in their cultural regimes (Taylor and Voorhees 2018). Similarly, when mainstream games challenge established norms, such as featuring a female protagonist, reactionary gamers organize against such relatively counter-hegemonic major entertainment products via social media and review aggregate sites, where the reactionaries voice their displeasure through *review-bombing* and targeted harassment campaigns against the game's developers (Klepeck 2018, MacLeod 2020).

In a sense, these reactionary tendencies run parallel to the Marxist observation that the petite bourgeoisie turn towards fascism when they lose out from capitalism's drive to monopolization. Marx predicted that the perpetual crises of capitalism lead to the middle classes losing their class status and turn their resentment towards lower social classes. Wilhelm Reich (1946, 88) pointed out that this anti-democratic reaction towards women is also a result of the patriarchal structure of small businesses. While the gamer aristocracy are not necessarily petite bourgeoisie, they do also lash out against those who are already marginalized as seen in their explicit resentment towards feminists, anti-racists, socialists, or LGBTQ advocates. Similar to how the petite bourgeoisie enjoy the patriarchal structure of their small businesses and lash out at women when they experience economic loss, so do the gamer aristocracy enjoy the chauvinistic nature of digital games cultures and terrorize marginalized groups when pressed on their social position and potential loss of material and



cultural privilege. Similar to the petite bourgeoisie's turn to fascism when experiencing loss, this reactionary dynamic speaks to how the gamer aristocracy is invested in the continuation of the status quo and therefore resort to anti-democratic tactics to suppress dissent.

A materialist analysis rooted in theories on imperialism and racialization accounts for such reactionary behavior by the gamer aristocracy. If anything were to change regarding the betterment of the cheap super-exploited labor in the periphery, the games industry, at least in its current form, would cease to exist. As Jong (2020, 16) writes,

"Without the massive inequalities created by American imperialism, it's likely that many of the features we associate with the modern videogame industry—such as the dominance of monopolistic corporations like Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft, which rely heavily on outsourced labour and third-party manufacturing, or the cultivation of the "console wars," which encourages consumers to buy multiple consoles and swap out old models for new ones in order to access new games—would either not exist, or would have taken on a very different form."

For example, when discussions about improving the working conditions of game developers, enthusiast consumers often react with a discussion if they would be willing to pay more for their entertainment (e.g., Jaffe 2020). While they may have a moral connection to the plight of game workers, their priority is a material self-interest. Therefore, this global economic division is one that enthusiast consumers are likely to prefer to uphold and defend due to the material benefits and affective wages they receive. 21st century imperialism in the games industry means that enthusiast consumers have an interest in upholding the global color line, so to speak. When enthusiasts, critics, activists, journalists, game developers, and scholars speak up about the injustices in the current system, then they are perceived as a threat to



those who have a material and cultural investment into the current system. These have received backlash and harassment from organized reactionary gamers, as evidenced throughout the last decade (Salter and Blodgett 2017, Massanari 2017).

### **Fascism as Imperialist Repression Turned Inward**

As I have argued, the reactionary organized movements are not an outlier, but a result of the games industry as part of 21<sup>st</sup> century imperialism with its chauvinistic anti-democratic tendencies. Because of the material and cultural fruits of a deeply unjust global system predicated on neocolonial and oppressive structures, reactionary gamers are motivated to defend the status quo via discursive harassment techniques. When people in the Anglophone world witness online harassment campaigns against marginalized groups and those challenging the status quo, then this is *simply* a result of imperialism that is turned inward. Aimé Césaire (2000, 36) wrote about the origins of fascism in World War II:

"[...] it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa."

Césaire was referring to how the horrors of World War II were a result of the colonialism that the European and North American powers had already applied to the colonies. Cope puts this movement as "fascism is imperialist repression turned inward" (2015, 354 his emphasis) to show that fascism arises when the horrors in the colonies that those in the imperial core have closed their eyes to and decivilized themselves to come home and are applied to those in the core as well. This is the same dynamic with reactionary gamers where the chauvinism required to justify and continue the super-exploitation of those working in the imperial peripheries is turned inward and



reproduced against those who are justified to be exploited and othered (women, racialized groups, immigrants, queerfolk, etc.). In this sense, the lessons from analysis by anti-imperialist thinkers such as Cope, Du Bois, and Césaire help us link the conditions of production with the political actions and reactionary movements in 21<sup>st</sup> century imperialism as they surface in different contexts, such as digital games.

Moreover, the key take-away from this analysis is that the ruling classes in the games industry are not in opposition to these reactionary gamers – rather the ruling classes in the games industry have an interest in cultivating and deploying the reactionary gamers as part of an anti-democratic silencing technique against workers, as well as a as a very stable and reliable market share: consumers are most relevant to the industry as buyers. For example, as Lana Polansky (2018) wrote after interviewing more than twenty game developers about how they find themselves in between a rock and a hard place when having to both answer to their bosses and respond to reactionary consumers.

"I don't mean to suggest that game companies and gamers knowingly conspired to silence and bully workers, but there is evidence that, as long as gamers direct their grievances at individual workers, videogame companies understand that they can use that dynamic to shield themselves from community criticism while using it as leverage in internal conflicts with employees. This has, for a long time, represented a win-win for companies, ensuring not just the PR victory with their fans, but also deeply suppressed and compliant workforce, and an opaque shroud over the industry's internal workings."

This means that reactionary, anti-democratic tactics such as those conducted by the gamer aristocracy can potentially be leveraged by companies and their bosses in order to maintain the exploitation of their workers without fearing them to unionize and to bargain for costly measures such as higher wages, safer working conditions, policies against sexism and racism at the workplace, and so on. In this sense, like the



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 technomasculinity, and general chauvinism that permeates the games industry, its products, and its cultures of consumption.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Defining monopoly capitalism is beyond the scope of this article, but Smith (2016, 229-231) characterizes it as the concentration of capital into giant corporations, the merging of financial and industrial capital, and of both with the state. Cf. also Baran and Sweezy (1966).

<sup>&</sup>quot;This list now includes the Chinese TenCent company as well. This does not mean that the imperial core thesis is flawed – rather that the introduction of a major Chinese company that similarly takes advantage of the international division of labor, appropriation of surplus value, and access to markets is symptomatic for the inter-imperialist rivalry between the US and China.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Even the negroes of the Congo are now being forced into the civilization attendant upon Manchester calicoes, Staffordshire pottery, and Birmingham hardware" (Marx and Engels 2010, 300).