

BOOK REVIEW

A precarious game: The illusion of dream jobs in the video game industry

Ergin Bulut

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Ergin Bulut's insightful exploration of the games industry exposes the precarious and unstable nature of game labour. The book critiques the personal, social and emotional costs, and the toxic implications, of unequal power relations embedded in methods of production in the games industry. Bulut questions, who can play and who must work in the games industry? This text illustrates how developers are alienated and exploited whilst shining a light on how these conditions are also dependent on the exploitation of others in further locations and settings. The book illustrates how passion, creativity, corporate culture and financialisation collide, providing a powerful critique of game labour.

There are 8 chapters in the book. The introduction illustrates the relationship between 'Desire' and its parent company 'Digital Creatives', charting Desire's journey from an independent studio to medium sized corporate games firm in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The introduction situates the book amid the structural and market mechanisms that pervade game labour. It follows a body of work challenging the myth of the 'dream job', contrasting glamorous and ludic work with exploitative and precarious work conditions (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009 and Woodcock, 2019). Bulut builds on work in critical games studies while drawing on critical studies of media and creative work and interdisciplinary insights from political economy, feminist theory, and autonomist Marxism.

Chapter 1 theorises economic and cultural inequalities embedded in games production, highlighting the industry's distinct form of inequality, produced when work looks and feels more like play, rendering poor conditions invisible. Bulut introduces Ludopolitics (a concept that unites chapters in the book), described as the complex collection of uneven power relations at the local and global level, to examine inequalities that are endemic to games production and reproduced at Desire. By examining the local and global consequences of the ludopolitical regime in games, Bulut correctly illustrates the unequal ground game labour rests upon. For some passion, privilege and work as play flourishes, while others experience alienation and precarity. At a global level, Bulut exposes the global inequalities that are embedded in games industry through the reliance on operating hardware that is manufactured in hazardous and exploitative workplaces in the Global South.

Chapter 2 illustrates Desire's journey from a small independent studio of 30 to a medium sized, corporate studio of over 200 developers. The chapter analyses two forms of precarity experienced developers, the precarity of an Independent studio searching for survival, and a financialised and networked level of precarity dependent on stock markets and corporate performance. In order to escape

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the precarity of an independent studio Bulut evaluates the compromises developers made in the name of perceived financial security. The chapter explains how a loss of financial control, new bureaucratic structures, enhanced project-based work and the removal of embedded masculine work culture caused friction among developers. Bulut rightly points to the inequity in these trade off's which result in a loss of control over the labour process, highlighting that developer's knowledge, information and experience are seized as a result of the acquisition and transformed into financialised and private intellectual property.

Chapter 3 and 4 draws on the methods of management to alter the productive subjectivities of workers. Adding a spatial dimension, Bulut considers the relocation of Desire to 'Game City' which aimed to harness the productive capacities of the workforce post-acquisition. Inspired by a public-private partnership, Desire's relocation and the transformation of 'Game City' reflected a wider economic and cultural transformation of the 'creative class' described in Richard Florida's creative and entrepreneurial cities. Despite offering affordable housing and a bohemian lifestyle to workers, Bulut lays bare the contradictions of creative urban development's laden with precarity, volatile economies and unstable networks, stemming from inherent middle-class values that neglect racial, gender and class-based inequalities. Chapter four analyses management attempts (and difficulties) in regulating the workforce, to ensure productivity within a fluid labour process. It charts how temporal, spatial and communicative practices are aimed at shaping subjectivities towards proactive, self-responsible, passionate and flexible team members. It critiques how flexible work polices (for most workers), a playful workspace and in-house training programmes are designed to cultivate communication skills and aimed to regulate emotions. By doing this, Bulut extends understanding of how subjectivities are activated normatively, through discourses, space and practices of freedom, in order to maximise surplus value under the guise of playful or ludic work.

Chapter 5 critically analyses inequalities at Desire by exploring tensions around masculine work cultures and women's domestic and emotional labour. Bulut draws on sobering interviews with the female spouses to uncover the extent, and ways, women perform unpaid labour, which largely reproduce and normalise gendered work cultures. Going beyond exposés of 'crunch' time in the industry, Bulut draws on Gregg (2011), to illustrate how work colonises the intimate spaces of the family, forcing domestic infrastructures to be arranged in a gendered manner. However, for spouses, ambivalence is contrasted with the personal fulfilment gained in providing support that reinforces the unity of their relationship and their family with discomfort about the dark side of the industry, the stressful nature of the job and the enhanced precarity their spouses experience amid declining financial conditions. By examining these narratives Bulut shines additional light on the class-based inequities in games production presenting a paradox, women are exploited but enjoy class-based capital such as knowledge and time to enact and mobilise support.

Chapter 6 focuses on the experiences of games testers, exposing the mis-sold promise of the 'do what you love' mantra. Bulut introduces the concept, 'the degradation of fun', inspired by Braverman (1974) separation of design from execution, to describe testers work as the translation of play into quantifiable repetitive tasks, long hours, precarious working conditions, stratification of the workplace, and the blurring of work and play manifested in testers work. Bulut positions testers as precarious, but ambivalent, individualised 'second class citizens' that choose not to unite or resist against inhospitable conditions. Feelings of expendability, alongside the symbolic capital of working in games alongside a broader recognition of the structural dynamics of the games industry, result in the rationalisation of precarity and thus the degradation of fun as the status quo.

Chapter 7 underlines that precarity is not exclusive to testers. The financial security offered by a corporate takeover is unmasked via solemn narratives from a destabilised workforce who lay bare the consequences of financialisation. A financialised structure, combined with decreasing revenue,

product failures, increasing competition and poor investments brought falling stock prices; all of which resulted in redundancies and the eventual bankruptcy and resale of Digital Creatives. Bulut critiques individualised approaches to dealing with precarious employment, and an indifference to managing risk and precarity in more collective ways. Drawing comparisons with other ‘actively disorganised’ areas of the creative economy (Ross, 2009), Bulut highlights the seductive nature of game labour and how perceptions of engaging in self-actualisation work can absorb resistance.

The book concludes by reassessing the relationship between love and game labour, illustrating how love can anchor destructive management practices and precarious conditions, while reinforcing workplace inequalities and the unequal ludopolitical structures of game production. Bulut powerfully critiques quality of life in the games industry, as passion and work as play interact with financialisation to heighten exploitative practices and untenable work conditions. In its final contribution, Bulut considers how unionisation, Universal Basic Income (UBI) and a radical imagining of a post work society may help reconstruct the games industry. Despite noting an indifference to collective action at Desire, Bulut contrasts resistance to collective action with increasing recognition that poor working conditions in the games industry can be improved by collective action. Bulut considers alternative ways we can challenge the unequal logics of production pointing to how UBI can promote citizenship and empower workers by encouraging workers to leave demeaning work conditions to focus on skills, education and more fulfilling work. Bulut ends by contemplating a utopian vision for developers to imagine a post work society by engaging in the refusal of work and demanding shorter working hours in order to escape the unequal regime of ludopolitics. Bulut gives a compelling rallying call stating, ‘Game workers, players and we, we citizens, deserve better’.

In closing, Bulut illustrates that, despite contemporary prescription, very few can enjoy the dream job of making games by provocatively exposing the dark side of the ‘do what you love’ mantra. It lays bare the precarious, alienating and exploitative conditions, and hidden costs for those involved in, and associated with, games production. It critiques the wider inequalities that the association of work and love feeds off, and reproduces, challenging us to think differently about the future of work.

Adrian Wright 

University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK

Email: Awright2@uclan.ac.uk

ORCID

Adrian Wright  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2803-212X>

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