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ATCM 6383

9 December 2019

"Pay-2-Playbour": Manufactured Difficulty and the Rise of the Lifestyle Game

Video games are hard work. They require significant investments of time, money, personal resources, and bodies (both digital and physical) to create and to play. While the differences between the labor to make the game and the labor to play it are extensive, one difference strikes out from the rest. For the game developer embedded in the games industry, the rewards for a well-made game are, typically, profit and recognition; for the player, the game itself is both the challenge and the prize. Yet, a worrying trend in the games industry has begun to alienate the very players it is trying to court. Under the auspices of the "games-as-a-service" model, developers can theoretically make a game last forever by providing a series of unreasonably tall barriers for new content under the disguise of a game's "difficulty," stoking the technomasculine drive to "complete" or "beat" the game into a fever pitch while also providing the developer with a constant stream of revenue via sequels, subscriptions, microtransactions, or downloadable content (DLC). Through a variety of predatory design decisions and years of cultural conditioning, the games industry manipulates players to devote themselves to overcoming these artificial mountains, transforming video games into a "lifestyle choice" that obscures the incremental conflation of play and labor.

Lifestyle Games

The lifestyle game has floated around conceptually for the past decade, but the archetype has not been extensively studied in academia. The term colloquially refers to no one set of mechanics or "genre" of game. Rather, lifestyle games are overarching titles that seek to embed themselves within the fabric of the player's daily life. This is done by integrating the player socially and monetarily into the game. *World of Warcraft* (2004) is a notable example, both for its global player base and its longevity. Unlike the many other Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games that sprang up to compete with it, *WoW* has stayed culturally and monetarily relevant in the gaming world for 25 years.

One reason for this has been *WoW*'s monetization and sheer wealth of content. In order to play, players must pay a monthly subscription fee.[1] A new player, attempting to make the most of their limited time, will quickly find *WoW* so full of content that they would have to play it every day for hours at a time over multiple months or even years to catch up to the latest expansion. Even if this puts the player off playing the game, the player paid in advance, leading them to make the choice between digging deeper into the game or "throwing their money away." The longer the player stays, the more likely they will fall prey to the sunk-cost fallacy. Economist Corina Haita-Falah notes that the sunk-cost fallacy's potency should not be overlooked, writing that "once found on a course of action to which they committed an investment (e.g. time, money, effort), people continue to stay on that course of action and invest even more resources despite it being unprofitable" (44). A player who spent $60 to play *WoW* for a couple of months

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[1] As of writing, the fee is $14.99, and it includes access to the base game and all but the most recent expansions, which are sold separately.

will have an easier time unplugging from the game than a similar player who has played for years and devoted hundreds of dollars.

Lifestyle games also stoke interpersonal virtual relationships and interaction. *WoW*, by its very design, requires players to group with other people to play in raids, and players will have a far easier time joining a guild than running the game solo. Collectibles hide in the most unusual places, and achievements provide bragging rights and markers of success. *WoW* even reworked its Refer-A-Friend system to reward players with free game time, special powers, cosmetic gear, and experience boosts "because Azeroth is best experienced with friends at your side" (Blizzard, para. 2). These rewards only count the longer that the referred friends play, which promotes players peer pressuring others to dive into the game.

World of Warcraft is far from the only lifestyle game or the most popular. *Warframe* (2013), a free-to-play MMO, reached over 50 million registered users this year, and *Fortnite* (2017) recorded 78.3 million active players in a single month shortly after adding the wildly popular battle royale mode and expanding to mobile platforms.[2] The fact that both *Warframe* and *Fortnite: Battle Royale* are free-to-play no doubt plays a role in their ability to recruit new players, but they also have small gameplay loops, extensively monetized customizations, and a growing fan culture surrounding them. These fans extend the game outward through social media, acting unknowingly and/or intentionally as free advertising for their game of choice through discussion, art, and community building.

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[2] *WoW* stopped reporting subscriber counts in 2015, but one estimate from leaked data put the number of active subscriptions around 1.7 million as of October 2018 (@WeakAuras).

This mixing of leisure with activities typically associated with work culture intrigues and frightens many scholars. One view notes such activity as a new form of "participatory culture," where "[m]edia consumers want to become media producers" and "fans envision a world where all of us can participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths" (Jenkins 456-58). This participation feeds into a cycle of media; after fans expand on a media object, the media producers react and respond with what fans desire. Though many enjoy discussions of fandom and cultural creation, one concept that has arisen in fandom studies is "playbour." This hybridization of play and labor observes that participatory culture can extend to the point that it is "[s]imultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited" (Terranova 33). This can be seen in practices such as modding, characterized simultaneously as "idleness, non-productiveness and escapism" and "a valid, if slightly eccentric, form of work" (Kucklich, para. 26). This contradictory view allows game developers to reap the profits of fan creations without having to invest any additional resources as fans refine, reiterate, and remix their game of interest *ad infinitum*, transforming any kind of game into a personal lifestyle game.[3]

The people most likely to integrate lifestyle games into their lives are typically straight, young cis-gendered men and boys with disposable income and spare time. Of course, the idea that video games are made for such an audience is nothing new, and neither are the criticisms of that imaginary that have been addressed by many others. Carly Kocurek, however, discusses in *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at*

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[3] This is doubly true with the introduction of services like Patreon which allow fans of fan content to directly fund the creation of fan works. This has led to many fans creating "side hustles" out of their "labors of love," effectively crowdfunding one's employment in the entertainment industry.

the Video Game Arcade how that imaginary came about in the United States through

the induction of the leisure activity of gaming into the broader concept of

"technomasculinity." She describes the technomasculine as such:

> ...an embrace of heavily individualized, as opposed to organizationally based, competition; an acceptance of credit, most visibly consumer credit, as a part of daily economic life; the acceleration and propagation of novel amusements as a primary category of spending; and the celebration of those same technological, specifically computer associated, abilities. (Kocurek 13)

Using the arcade as her example, Kocurek maps out how early e-Sports competitions,

"credits" (i.e. trading quarters for continues and extra lives), the proliferation of arcade

cabinets, and the glamorization of game mastery were co-opted by the burgeoning (and

recovering) games industry and mass media and then transformed into the ideal of the

gamer as "the consolidation of youth, masculinity, violence, and digital technology"

(xvii). The theme of the competition is of note, as the constant media attention around

competitive gaming "further entrenches the notion of the arcade, and of gaming, as a

masculine enclave and a place where boys might prove themselves" (186). Regardless of

whether the playing of video games formally counts as a sport, it has already been

culturally accepted as one through its sublimation by technomasculine ideals.

Technomasculinity also plays into the politics of playbour through the ideas of

personal technological prowess and of the primacy of leisure. Kocurek writes that the

technomasculine utilizes "a language of endangerment and preservation" to twist the

arcade's history from one of mixed-gendered adult play into an "elite gamer enclave"

where young boys became men (171-72). Since console manufacturers and copyright

holders often neglect to archive their products or make them available for future

audiences, gamers feel as if it is their duty, their job to "save the arcades" (Kocurek 169).

Again, this turns video games from a "fun" activity into a form of work and labor, excusing the companies that ignore the cultural value of their products from the work of archival and passing the labor of preservation to the individual fan.

The Difficult Nature of Defining Difficulty

Where technomasculinity is often felt, however, is in the drive of mastery over difficult games. Popularly, the difficulty of a game is described in terms of "player versus environment" (PvE) or "player versus player" (PvP). This is due to, as Kocurek mentions, the "embrace of heavily individualized…competition," which can be seen in the rise of the "Souls-like" genre (13). Based on the popularity of From Software's *Dark Souls* (2011) series, this genre pits a player against a series of enemies that test one's mastery of the game's mechanics to a degree where one mistake can result in the player character's death. The game's marketing frequently accentuated the difficulty inherent to the series—the tagline for the original *Dark Souls* re-release was the "Prepare to Die Edition"—and exclusively targeted "hardcore" gamers. In comparison to the *Call of Duty* series and other multiplayer games, *Dark Souls* is a largely single-player PvE experience with optional online content such as PvP arenas and invading other players' worlds. While the PvP elements are also popular, the consensus is that the real challenge is between players and the game itself. As *Dark Souls* grew in popularity, players began to create additional challenges to separate themselves from the masses. Twitch streamer "bearzly," for instance, beat the *Dark Souls* games using "a Rock Band guitar peripheral, Rock Band drum kit, Rock Band piano, Donkey Konga bongo drum, microphone (using voice control only), Wiimote, dancemat, steering wheel and an Xbox 360 pad, albeit played with one finger," a feat that has earned him recognition via a Guinness World

Record for "Most alternative control methods used to complete *Dark Souls*" (Lynch, para. 3). While bearzly uses these controllers to better achieve the technomasculine ideal of mastery in *Dark Souls*, the fact he and many others can do so within only a few years of the game's release speaks to the dedication of fans, the power of technomasculinity, and the effectiveness of the game's marketing.

Figure 1 - bearzly playing Dark Souls *with a dance pad.*

The reason the hype around *Dark Souls* centered on the game's ability to kill the player character repeatedly is that games media (and the culture of games as a whole) do not have a standard vocabulary of what makes a game "hard" to play. In other words, what makes a game "difficult"? In "On Difficulty in Video Games: Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect," Patrick Jagoda outlines three core difficulty types inherent to video games. bearzly's efforts to beat *Dark Souls* using creative methods personify what Jagoda calls "mechanical difficulty," or "the required familiarity with the designed system and a cultivation of physical or strategic skills that enable success or mastery" (204). What mastery looks like depends on the game (e.g. a leaderboard or a narrative conclusion) but is always predicated on working with and against the game's mechanisms. When people talk about games and difficulty, this is generally what is

meant, but Jagoda notes two other ways games can challenge players: interpretive difficulty and affective difficulty.

If mechanically difficult games challenge the body and its capability to complete tasks set forth within (and without) the game, interpretive difficulty refers to the struggle to untangle the sometimes-conflicting design choices and narrative beats contained within the game to unlock a deeper understanding of both the game in question and the culture that helped to create it. Interpretive difficulty is a challenge most often faced by games scholars and academics as they craft and implement theories old and new to draw out meaning in even the most narratively-lacking game. Janet Murray provides a humorous example of this in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* when she compared the gameplay of *Tetris* (1984) to "the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s—of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught" (178).[4] A more serious example of the interpretive difficulty in games lies in Soraya Murray's *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*. Here, Murray makes a connection between the difficulty inherent in games like *The Last of Us* (2013)*, Spec Ops: The Line* (2012)*,* and the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot and "whiteness in crisis," as each one has "a narrative of loss, disempowerment or disadvantage – of things going horribly wrong" as (presumably white) players face "a hostile, brutal or unrelenting environment" that they must fight against (92). This implementation of mechanical

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[4] This accused overthinking of such a narratively dry game added fuel for the then-ongoing debate between narratology and ludology in Games Studies, to which Murray responds in the book's updated edition that "[g]ames are worthy of analysis in their own terms, but they are also a part of culture, like novels and movies and paintings, and narrative analysis is often highly relevant to understanding and designing digital games" (191).

difficulty serves as a vehicle for the White protagonists/players to play "*victim* rather than hero" against "radical otherness," typically represented as non-White or non-human enemies in these games (98, 103, original emphasis). Interpretive difficulty, then, is a form of close reading, though Jagoda notes, "the contingent and modal interpretive difficulties presented by games often require knowledge of different corpuses and production contexts than those of the literary and traditional art worlds" (214).

In many cases, this knowledge is of other games within the genre, but it also includes the material ways in which games are played. In *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, Anna Anthropy critiques the design of the Xbox 360 game controller, writing that the "amount of both manual dexterity and game-playing experience required to operate a game designed for the Xbox 360 controller makes play inaccessible to those who aren't already grounded in the technique of playing games" (35). Furthermore, many games are designed with console controllers as the primary interaction point, limiting design to a handful of inputs. Modern arcade games often have customized hardware like "large ride-on vehicles, dance platforms, or drum sets" that are far more expensive and cumbersome than a standard Xbox console (31).

Out of Jagoda's three difficulty types, affective difficulty in video games is the least explored or understood, yet it is quite possibly the most important way that games engage players. Murray experienced this while playing *The Last of Us*: "In my own playthrough of the game, it seemed that the affective dimensions of the game were established not merely through horror, but the interplay between the horror and the melancholic" (102). This affective difficulty Murray refers to is fundamentally different

yet entangled with the mechanical and interpretive. Jagoda calls this mode of difficulty "irresolvable":

> Games can produce annoyance, anxiety, or something as common as rage quitting. They inspire everything from delighted curiosity to deep addiction. They require orientations of flexible optimism. They can captivate us with connective feelings—apophenia—or darker entanglements—paranoia. They can allow us to think through complicated circumstances, empathize with others, and experiment with unfamiliar experiences. Furthermore, the difficulties that might accompany such experiences are augmented by the layered ways in which affect is shaped by and enters into conversation with historical and disciplinary factors. (Jagoda 220)

Affect in games is borne not from the developer's hand nor from the player's self but from the collision between the two. It is the affective difficulty that a player works through that renders a gaming experience personal. Per Jagoda, "At some level, a video game is *already and fundamentally relational* and cannot proceed without involvement on the part of one or more players" (223, original emphasis). Games such as *Gone Home* and *The Beginner's Guide* are often derided for their lack of difficulty (granting them the derogatory title of "walking simulators"), but they, in fact, challenge the player's feelings, affect, and emotions instead of their twitch reflexes or critical thinking skills.

Jagoda's breakdown of game difficulty provides a helpful elaboration of how games embody multiple difficulties beyond the standard "easy, medium, or hard" settings of games. Nevertheless, Jagoda's argument hinges on good faith on both sides of the screen. The players are expected to engage with the game within prescribed norms, and the developers are likewise expected to make a working product that, if not necessarily easy, is at least fair. This notion is pure fantasy, and it has been since the earliest days of the arcade. Gamers often find ways to manipulate game mechanics to "beat" the game in record times in speedrunning culture or to hack the game to further

their character's growth and skill to the detriment of others. Many game designers (then and now) are more interested in maximizing profits-per-player, such as through anti-cheat software and digital rights management (DRM) software to prevent second-hand game exchanges. Furthermore, this good faith argument centers the player's interactions with the game, ignoring the role that the developer plays beyond the cursory authorial attribution to the game's mechanics. The player doesn't make the game's mechanics, its narrative, or how its distributed; the developer manufactures them.

Manufactured Difficulty

If mechanical difficulty pits the player against the systems of a game, interpretive difficulty against the player's ability to uncover subtext, and affective difficulty against the reactions of their own corporeal presence, then *manufactured difficulty* pits the player against the developers themselves. Manufactured difficulty in games can be understood as the implementation of mechanics, design decisions, and the properties of the game itself that cannot be changed, bypassed, or interacted with beyond what the developer intends. This goes beyond merely making games "hard." Greg Costikyan notes that "Games are *supposed* to be, in some sense, 'hard to use,' or at least, non-trivial to win" (qt. in Jagoda 204). But this implies that the game is intended to be won in the first place. The rules of a game are created to produce lose states, game over screens, and defeats. They tell the player all the ways that they can play the game and shut down alternatives. There are many ways to lose a game but only a few pre-determined ways to win.

The belief that video games should be "fair" finds some roots in the muddied history of pinball, which was classified as a gambling machine in the U.S. until the mid-1970s. Relating the mechanical difficulty of pinball to its distinction from "chance-based gambling games," Jagoda remarks, "Policy makers reclassified the game as an activity that promoted learning and skill development, thus marking it as an activity with a modicum of cultural value rather than a vice that invited predominantly repetitive actions" (206). By bringing pinball in line with sports, the focus shifted from the creator of the game (which was presumed to be scamming people with an unwinnable game) to the intrepid player who demonstrates their "skill" through pinball.[5] Since pinball is "fair," the player can only lose via their own ineptitude or mistakes.

Around the same time, claw machines were also deregulated from their status as gambling machines, even though they are manufactured with the same principles as them. It is an open secret that crane games, claw machines, and many other "classic" arcade games are rigged against the player for the purposes of drawing as many quarters as possible. Phil Edwards of *Vox* reports that claw machines can "make sure that players are only winning a limited number of times" and that "the machine's owner can fine-tune the strength of the claw beforehand so that it only has a strong grip a fraction of the time that people play" through an interior control board (para. 7, 5). These games often use iPads and gaming consoles as bait, prizes that attract the traditional, technomasculine player already likely to be visiting the arcade. Since the odds of the player winning these prizes are incredibly slim, the operators rarely need to restock

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[5] Kocurek recounts how pinball was actually chance-based until 1947's introduction of the "player-operated flipper," as well as how they "offered cash or other prizes and were often made by the same companies that produced slot machines," making the connections between gambling and pinball more apparent than Jagoda describes (96).

these top prizes. This practice has caused some states such as Maryland to re-regulate claw machines and similar devices, but as Annys Shin of *The Washington Post* notes, the regulation only applies to the prizes within the machines (not the machines themselves), requiring operators to limit their prizes to under $30 or "pay a $50 electronic gaming device licensing fee and get approval from the lottery commission" (para. 14).[6] The argument inherent in this and similar rulings is, again, that the importance of games comes not from the potential rewards but the "experience" of the game itself, even if the prizes can only be obtained when the game allows it (para. 26).

Video game cabinets in arcades got their start on a similar principle. These machines were expensive to produce, purchase, and maintain, so they needed to turn a profit. So, like claw machines, manufacturers included a way for operators to adjust each game's mechanics to increase the overall difficulty. The game *Tempest*, for example, had options to limit the number of starting lives, make the game more expensive to play, or even make the enemies more aggressive right from the dip switch ("Tempest – Dip Switch Settings"). Quite literally, game manufacturers and developers manufactured difficulty and hardwired systems into the arcade cabinet to prevent players from victory and to encourage further monetary investment from the player.

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[6] A loophole around this ruling is that it does not apply to machines that award tickets in lieu of direct prizes, "even if the tickets can be redeemed for prizes worth more than $30" (Shin, para. 15).

Figure 2 - Dip switch configuration for Tempest

But manufactured difficulty is a tricky thing to balance. Tweak one number, and players can play for hours for a single quarter. Change a different setting, and you get *Asteroids Deluxe* (1981). *Asteroids Deluxe* was made to succeed the original *Asteroids* (1979) game specifically because the original was too easy to master, which drove down how much money an individual machine could make. To offset this Atari produced *Asteroids Deluxe*, with the express purpose of making a significantly more difficult game. However, this backfired tremendously, as the games' difficulty was baked into the software itself. George Sullivan wrote about the game in the 1982 book *How to Win at Video Games*, claiming that "in the first few months after *Asteroids Deluxe* was introduced, it proved so difficult that many players turned their backs on the machine," eventually forcing Atari to re-release the game with an easier difficulty setting (81-82).

The trick that the games industry learned from the failure of *Asteroids Deluxe* and many other "too-difficult" games was to introduce difficulty incrementally. An excellent example of this is *Pac-Man* (1980), which speeds up the opposing ghosts and slows down Pac-Man as the player beats each level. The game was never designed with a "win-screen," instead ending on level 256 with a glitched-out level that the player is doomed to lose in; such a feat requires impressive knowledge of the game's design and a

not-insignificant amount of luck. Other games allow players to select the difficulty, typically with the monikers of "easy, medium, or hard" though more recent titles have alternative ways of making the game as accessible or as inaccessible as the player desires. While players can change the mechanical difficulty of these games to suit their personal tastes, these games often goad players into playing harder difficulties.[7]

Figure 3 - Difficulty screen with "easy" mode highlighted in Wolfenstein: The New Order *(2014)*

This goading ties into the development of affective difficulty in video games. Arcades require a physical transaction, quarters for lives. By the end of the 1980s, this became literal as more and more machines would feature a "Continue?" screen that would showcase the lead character facing a horrific and helpless death without the power of the almighty player (and "his" quarters) to save them. *Final Fight* (1989) for instance features Mike Haggar struggling against time to blow out sticks of dynamite while the countdown in the upper left-hand corner slowly and dramatically ticks down to zero. The effective utilization of affective difficulty here speaks to the insidious ways game developers coaxed one more play from players, sending the not-so-subtle message, "You got him/her into this mess, so it's your responsibility to save them!" At this stage,

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[7]In reaction to the backlash caused by this goading, many games have taken to calling their easy difficulties "story mode" to emphasize other aspects of the game than the reduction of the game's mechanical difficulty, such as its narrative, level design, and character interactions.

the game asks the player not to have fun but to do their "job" as a hero. And it is this job that the games industry has worked tirelessly to support over the years.

"Games-As-A-Service"

In November of 2017, EA had begun to give players who pre-ordered the deluxe edition of *Star Wars: Battlefront II* a ten-hour head start. The players who shelled out the extra cash to play this big-budget title early soon picked up on how much time and in-game currency would be required to unlock fan-favorite characters such as Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker, with some estimates reaching as high as 40-hours of gameplay. EA's community team, attempting to quell the inflammatory response, offered this comment on the Reddit thread "Seriously? I paid 80$ to have Vader locked?":

> The intent is to provide players with *a sense of pride and accomplishment* for unlocking different heroes.
>
> As for cost, we selected initial values based upon data from the Open Beta and other adjustments made to milestone rewards before launch. Among other things, we're looking at average per-player credit earn rates on a daily basis, and we'll be making constant adjustments to ensure that players have *challenges that are compelling, rewarding, and of course attainable via gameplay*.
>
> We appreciate the candid feedback, and the *passion* the community has put forth around the current topics here on Reddit, our forums and across numerous social media outlets.
>
> Our team will continue to make changes and monitor community feedback and update everyone as soon and as often as we can. (EACommunityTeam, emphasis mine.)

This comment has since become the most downvoted comment in Reddit history. Like the crane game and claw machine operators who rigged their games for maximum profit, players would have to either play *Star Wars: Battlefront II* as if it was a second job or purchase "loot crates" that, in addition to gifting the credits necessary for buying

characters like Darth Vader, grant players in-game tactical advantages. Simply put, the more real-money a player had on hand, the better their gaming experience would be.
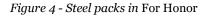
Many modern games use these tactics and more to coax money from players via microtransactions. Often costing only a little more than a dollar at minimum, microtransactions reintegrate the coin-operated machine, the "pay to play" model of the arcade, into gaming culture while cutting the middleman between the player and the developer (Giddings 772). Rather than the operator being the one who sets the difficulty of the machines and rigs the games, the developer themselves can change the game to maximize profits to the detriment of players. Worse still, many games that employ these techniques fall under the banner of the lifestyle game, explicitly marketing themselves as "ten-year journeys" or publishing "road maps" detailing future content to be added to the game.[8] That's if the major game developers even call them "games" and not "games-as-a-service." Developer and publisher Ubisoft have gone on record as stating that they are transforming games into "live services" that can extract "recurring revenue" from players over their lifetimes (qt. in Schreier). Under the moniker of a "service," games like *Anthem* (2018) and the *Destiny* series emphasize that they are a business model first and an entertainment product second. Developers are increasingly moving towards heavy monetization strategies to fund AAA game development that considers crunch periods and "100-hour weeks" to be the norm (Sinclair, para. 2). The result can be seen in just about every major release for the past few years: microtransactions, loot boxes,

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[8] The "ten-year journey" refers to plans made by publishers Activision and Electronic Arts to maintain support for the *Destiny* and *Anthem* franchises, respectively, by developers under their banners. The feat has proven more difficult than anticipated by the companies, as *Destiny 2* was republished by its developer Bungie after cutting ties with Activision. EA and Bioware's *Anthem*, in contrast, are attempting to completely rebuild the game after it failed to meet sales expectations.

purchasable cosmetics, DLC, and other add-ons to enhance the gaming experience for the individual player. Rather than directly asking for player involvement, developers have instead resorted to tweaking the mechanical difficulty of games, reworking game narratives and characters to better serve profitability, and underhandedly manipulating player affect to extort this funding.

Microtransactions, for instance, hide their true cost behind virtual currencies like gems, gold, or crystals. Where a player at an arcade will know that one quarter equals three lives, the obfuscation of prices in recent games prevents players from really knowing how much an in-game cosmetic item or power-up actually costs. A player of the 2017 game *For Honor* found that to unlock every character and customization would either take two years of constant gameplay or "a $732 over-charge of the original $60-100 spent on the game" (qtd. in Messner, para. 5). But players must do this math outside of the game itself, as *For Honor*'s currency ("Steel") comes in bundles of 5,000 for $4.99 while offering "free" Steel for bigger purchases. A common practice with virtual currency is to make the smaller "micro" transaction seem less profitable for the player than the larger ones, typically by offering bonus or "free" items or currency varying by which tier is purchased. This can create a FOMO or "fear of missing out" response, described as "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Przybylski et al 1). Other examples of player manipulation come in the form of flash deals or limited-time discounts, prodding players with a ticking clock to purchase virtual currency.

Figure 4 - Steel packs in For Honor

While the origin of microtransactions typically has its roots in mobile "free-to-play" games, one can trace the desire to purchase virtual currency to the practice of gold farming. Perhaps the most literal interpretation of the lifestyle game, gold farming includes players who "produce and sell virtual goods such as weapons, garments, animals, and even their own leveled-up avatars or 'virtual bodies' to other players for 'real world' money" (Nakamura 130). These gold farmers were often typecast as Chinese due to the country's many gold farming businesses. Regardless as to where they originated, these players engaged in playbour activities of the most recognizable degree: playing games to earn a living. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter posit that whenever Blizzard acted against gold farming operations in *World of Warcraft*, "the offenders it seeks are likely to be actual peasant farmers" trying to make a living in a rapidly changing economic landscape (145). Although gold farming still exists as a heavily-policed practice, developers pivoted instead to selling the currency themselves.

The prevalence of gold farming in *WoW* and other games and the practice's effective replacement by microtransactions elide the reasons why gold farming existed

in the first place. Seth Giddings writes in "Accursed Play: The Economic Imaginary of Early Game Studies," "To function as challenging games however and not some virtual cornucopia of unlimited items and vistas, video game design *must impose restrictions* on these worlds' production of and access to such resources" (777, emphasis mine). *WoW* operates on a subscription model, and Blizzard is highly motivated to restrict resources like gold to promote longer playtimes. To prevent players from feeling satisfied (and therefore escaping the sunk-cost fallacy), *WoW* and similar games are engineered to drip-feed players the resources and rewards that they need to progress through the game. Attempts to circumvent this blockage through "grinding" enemy hordes or special events only play into the game's Skinner-Box-esque design by playing longer for marginal progress. *WoW,* as a lifestyle game, promotes this behavior by allowing it; in contrast, purchasing gold from gold farmers bypasses the game's careful cultivation of resources, allowing players to skip straight to the "meat" of the game's high-level content where players can prove their technomasculinity in raids and guild events.[9]

Even in games where gold farming can't exist, game developers heavily police "farming" practices and apply the same content drip-feed and regulatory responses. Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018), a single-player PvE game, launched with additional microtransactions to provide permanent 50% XP and currency boosters. Samuel Roberts, a reporter for *PC Gamer*, reflects in a conversation with Tom Senior that the difference between the two experiences is striking:

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[9] It should also be noted that *WoW* also includes the ability to purchase level-boosts, which curtails the buying and selling of leveled-up characters.

>I could breeze through the opening islands without wasting time on as many side activities, focusing on what I believe are higher-quality side quests and main missions. Seven hours into the game, with the paid XP booster, I'm only ticking off the activities I want to do, and having no problem with the level curve. I've generally avoided the mercenary boards and limited time quests. *This is the way I want to play. It costs $10/£9 extra.* (Senior and Roberts, para. 7, emphasis mine)

Without the boosters, Senior replies, *Odyssey* becomes "grueling" and "less fun" (para. 10). When Ubisoft released a "Story Creator Mode" (in-game modding), players flooded the system with "farming quests" that automatically awarded XP as an alternative to both the game's need for level-grinding and Ubisoft's "solution"; eventually, Ubisoft banned these quests, writing in a forum post, "These exploits risk jeopardizing the overall quality, integrity, and purpose of Story Creator Mode," and promising to sanction players "who continue to willingly and intentionally misuse the tool" (Ubi-QuB3, para. 3). No mention of the XP booster was made in the post, though it most likely was a major factor in the shutdown of the practice.[10]

Other methods mirror the arcade in more obvious ways. Like arcade continue screens, some games will place characters in emotionally trying circumstances as ways to keep players engaged. 2018's *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery*, like other mobile games, uses the common resource of "energy," a timer for how long one is able to play the game at any given point in time that recharges passively. Conveniently, playing *Hogwarts Mystery* at release found the player character strangled by vines just as the player runs out of energy. Attempting to "tug at vines" only results in a pop-up indicating that the player can refill their energy by paying with gems, which are in turn

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[10] On a related note, *Destiny* (2014) patched out the "Loot Cave," a fan-favorite spot for gear drops, with developer Bungie ruminating that "shooting at a black hole for hours on end isn't our dream for how *Destiny* is played," although fans remarked that Bungie should instead make loot in general more rewarding (qtd. in McWhertor, para. 6). In both cases, the developers tell the players how they should play the game with the ability to enforce it.

purchased with real money. As *Eurogamer*'s Tom Phillips writes, "Then you can either pay up, or leave them being strangled until your energy recharges" in approximately half an hour (para. 9). What's more insidious is the game's target audience of children and young teen fans of *Harry Potter*.

While games typically receive moral repudiation for violence and sexual content, more recent critiques have come from parents whose children spent thousands of dollars on microtransactions. Zoe Kleinman of the *BBC* compiled a host of stories, each sharing themes of confusion, grief, and shock that hundreds and thousands of dollars can be spent on games marketed explicitly for children. One parent recalls how her five-year-old son reacted after spending £300 in *Mini Golf King*, "When my son realized that he'd spent real money, he was completely inconsolable, saying he was so sorry for being naughty and he thought they were pretend coins" (Kleinman, para. 29). Despite claims that these microtransactions are "just cosmetic" and don't affect gameplay, the fact that in-game cosmetics cost exorbitant amounts of money and are just a couple of clicks away at any point has alarmed politicians. Loot boxes, like those found in *Star Wars: Battlefield II,* Blizzard's *Overwatch*, and others, are currently under intense scrutiny for their connections to problem gambling and Internet Gaming Disorder (Dreier et al 332, Macey and Mamari 35, Zendle and Cairns 9).

By combining the economic dubiousness of microtransactions, the technomasculine draw of game difficulty, and the potential staying power of the lifestyle game, developers effectively ask players to fund their game development and give players more of the game as the reward. But these methods exacerbate the current condition of gaming by forcing players into choosing between paying more for the game

they spend hours grinding and devoting their playbour or playing something else. While there is no lack of games by smaller studios that offer complete experiences for significantly less money than the "live service" games, they rarely match the sheer depth of content, the level of graphical detail, or the marketing budgets of the kings of the new arcade.

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