

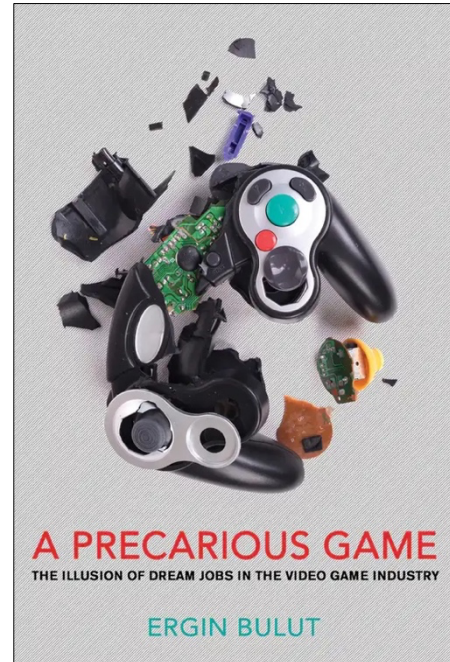
Ergin Bulut, **A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry**, Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2020, 222 pp., \$23.95 (paperback).

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Since the invention of arcade games of then-famous Atari in the 1970s, the video game industry has enormously grown up, particularly with console games. A SuperData (2021) review demonstrates that the growth in earnings of digital games had up to a 12% increase, with \$126.6 billion in 2020, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. Well before the invention of video games, Huizinga (1938/1949) defined play as

a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life.” (p. 28)

When ordinary life becomes extra-ordinary with lockdowns, video games can make it bearable for those who can access them.



Yet, according to Ergin Bulut, author of **A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry**, the production of video games is not as easy as it might seem at first sight. The release of AAA video games takes an average of 18–48 months, with hundreds of employees working overtime and an approximate cost of \$50 million. What happens during the production process at the play factory is often neglected by the studies of ludology and narratology, focusing on the content and the design of the game, along with the act of playing. The author carefully examines the organization of the production process in the game industry. By asking the fundamental question of who can play and who has to work under which conditions in a predominantly White-male industry, the author investigates the underlying characteristics of the video game industry, which is full of multiple and intersectional inequalities. Building on critical game studies, the book destroys the illusion of “dream jobs” in the industry by politicizing the love of work.

The study is mainly based on the author’s ethnographic research for his dissertation, conducted from 2010–2013 at a medium-sized game studio in the United States, which he anonymizes as Desire. The book relies on extensive research data gathered via participant observation, including 56 in-depth interviews and a small survey. From the perspective of critical political economy, feminist theory, and autonomist Marxism, Bulut examines the inequalities within the labor process during the ups and downs of an independent game studio that was acquired by a parent company called Digital Creatives that declared bankruptcy, causing a new auction. The author efficiently combines these approaches by critically employing the concepts of immaterial

labor (Lazzarato, 1996) to discuss game production and ludopolitics in the game industry, and uniquely extending his analysis to the social reproduction of labor in an urban and domestic space.

In the game industry, crunch (i.e., overworking for long periods) has become an established norm despite various criticisms (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Woodcock, 2019, 2020). Bulut examines the conditions that still make it possible since the EA (Electronic Arts) spouse case revealed the problems of the industry in 2004.¹ That brings us to implications of the "DWLY: Do what you love" mantra (see Tokumitsu, 2015). In line with the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005), the game industry provides playful workplaces, removing the boundaries between home and work with flexible working hours. Providing joyful possibilities, such as beer, libraries, a poker table, Nerf gun wars, and showers after exercising at the gym or jogging, *Desire* looks like a "rebellious playground" (p. 98), allowing developers to "playbor" (Kücklich, 2009, p. 343) and even providing "a second home" (p. 125) for workers to sleep at overnight. Work no longer looks like work, but like a "labor of love," a "dream job" for college students who are even advised to "work for free if necessary" (pp. 29–31), and a love and passion (see Ramsay, 2012) that drives developers to insane working hours.

Nevertheless, this so-called dream job comes with various faces of alienation in a precarious work environment. By understanding capitalism as a regime of desire, following Lordon (2014), Bulut argues that alienation goes beyond the loss of relative autonomy and control via intellectual property rights and turns into an internally desired joyful alienation of subjectivities transforming "one's life into work" (p. 41). In fact, the appropriation of labor "throughout the whole of the 24 hours in the day" (Marx, 1867/1990, p. 367) is at the "inherent nature" of capitalist production. For a materialist investigation of immaterial labor and the discourse of love, Bulut digs into the sphere of the social reproduction of game developers' working capacities and underlines the gendered inequalities in the domestic space, enabling a "fraternity house" at the studio (p. 116). Interviews with developers' partners showed how crunch became possible, in line with the EA spouse case, and filled a significant gap in the literature. The discourse of love and passion in the game industry is also deeply racialized and gendered, with a predominantly White-male labor force dependent on their partners for social reproduction at the local level, and "the exploitation of racialized and gendered bodies and nature in the Global South due to manufacturing and recycling" (p. 34) at the global level.

In the game industry, precarity is experienced differently between the core creative team and game testers, referred to as "second-class citizens" (p. 122). While the programmers, artists, and designers have creative autonomy in their labor processes, particularly during the studio's independent time, precarity is more acute for testers, mostly working in temporary positions with hourly contracts, thanks to the reserve army of labor of the hopeful testers (p. 133). Bulut defines the feelings of game testers as "degradation of fun," manifested as the "translation of play into quantifiable tasks, long work hours, precarious working conditions, repetitive tasks, stratification in the workplace, and the inability to 'purely' enjoy video games outside of work" (p. 144). With the acquisition of *Desire* by Digital Creatives, the production process is identified as intensified commodification, with the prevalent rules of corporate governance and stock markets. For the sake of the financial security of *Desire*, the relative autonomy of developers was sacrificed so that precarity became an existential condition. However, the effects of the financial downturn of the parent company in 2011 also caused

¹ See: <https://ea-spouse.livejournal.com/274.html>

layoffs for developers at Desire, hitting the “deluxe suit” of *Titanic* (p. 145). It can be argued that this financialization process triggered proletarianization for game developers at Desire. In this regard, the effects of the 2018 crisis on the game industry are pending review by researchers.

In the conclusion, Bulut discusses the emerging antagonisms in the industry and the current wave of unionization, particularly in France and the UK, along with the global movement of Game Workers Unite. He observes that “workers are starting to organize to resist the instrumentalization of love and passion” (p. 162), and also brings forward the concept of Universal Basic Income as a strategy to counter precarity. Despite the general lack of interest in unions and collective action in the industry, Bulut’s research revealed signs of unrest surrounding the rules of the game industry and its never-ending workdays. This reminded me of Marx’s (1852/1937) famous metaphor, noted for the revolutionary moment in *The 18th Brumaire*: “Well burrowed, old mole!” (p. 61). The resentment accumulated over the years in the game industry has come to light with the emergence of a global collective movement.

Bulut’s study is enlightening and builds understanding of the conditions of labor and so-called love and passion in the game industry, revealing intersectional inequalities and racialized and gendered practices. By integrating critical political economy, feminist theory, and autonomous Marxism, he is well equipped to materialize the immaterial labor in the game industry by also focusing on social reproduction in the urban and domestic space. His challenge against the DWYL mantra can be exemplarily deployed in other forms of work in digital capitalism. Further research might focus on the class formation processes in the game industry and the repercussions of the Black Lives Matter movement on the industry.

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