

Collusion. Mapping the Interplay between Paid and Unpaid Labourers in the Digital Games Industry

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The basic premise of this paper is the notion that computer game production can be conceptualised as a game played among various players, on a heterogeneous and distributed playing field, and according to rules which are subject to constant changes. The playing field on which digital games production takes place can be regarded as structurally analogous to the gamespace of digital games themselves. Both digital gamespace and digital games production are structured by topological constraints which render some moves possible, and some impossible, and both types of spaces are subject to processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. We can thus conceptualise the playing field of digital games production as encompassing both real and virtual spaces.

In regard to the players involved in the production of digital games, my analysis highlights the fact that developers and publishers as well as players of digital games contribute to the production of digital gameplay. However, rather than to describe them as 'prosumers' or participatory audiences, I regard them as players in order to highlight the fact that the roles which they play in the process of games production are highly contingent. Nevertheless, we can differentiate between the 'luditude' on the one hand and the imperial power of gaming capital on the other, which are in a constant struggle with each other. This struggle can be conceptualised as a conflict over who makes the rules of digital games production and who can break them. In general, we can say that those at the peripheries of the playing field, such as the labourers who work in manufacturing plants for the electronic components of games consoles, are usually not in a position to negotiate the rules to which they are subject. Those at the centre, or rather centres, of the playing field, however, can usually shape rule sets in ways which are beneficial for them.

Nevertheless, the integration of the rule sets which govern digital games production, such as intellectual property rights, regulatory frameworks and technological standards, is far from perfect. There is considerable friction between those systems, and this is what introduces an element of instability to the system. The production of digital games is a high-risk game for all players, although it should be highlighted that the risks differ considerably among them. The distribution of risk from the centres to the peripheries is also one of the most compelling reasons to find ways of breaking the rules of digital games production. Breaking the rules thus emerges as a highly politicised concept, which is connected to questions of globalised production, the transformation of play into labour and human subjectivity in highly technologised cultural settings. The players in the field of digital games production are thus faced with a choice between collusion, elusion or delusion.