

An Exploitation Ecosystem Model for Fan-based Labour in the Games Industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper will introduce the Exploitation Ecosystem (ExEc) model, which is based upon the foundational work of Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2006), Crane (2013), and Barrientos et al. (2013). The ExEc model organises and synthesizes research in slavery, exploitation, and precarious work into a more focused structure that can be applied to understanding exploitation in affluent modern economies. The model re-categorises the work of previous researchers and integrates them in a holistic approach, represented across two layers in the proposed model. The basic architecture of the model is introduced, revealing three aspects to exploitation: organisational, societal and individual, and is illustrated via examples. The ExEc model is particularly relevant to domains that rely heavily on fan passion and third-party content creators for their success, such as the games industry.

Keywords

exploitation, modern slavery, theoretical model, fan labour

INTRODUCTION

Labour rights violations are human rights violations and can occur in many different forms (Christ et al 2020; United Nations General Assembly 1948). The majority of research in labour exploitation and modern slavery has been conducted on marginalised populations working in third world countries in labour-intensive fields such as agriculture and mining. That research draws attention to slavery and exploitation in its most obvious and extreme forms; people trafficking, child labour, chattel slavery and extreme labour exploitation in global supply chains (but rarely in global labour chainsⁱ). The generalised research and regulatory focus has been on the overt and obvious ‘traditional’ forms of slavery, that happen ‘elsewhere’. Unfortunately, every society experiences labour exploitation, including extreme forms of labour exploitation. ‘Nicer’ or more acceptable forms of modern slavery and labour

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exploitation exist in affluent western cultures and often go unreported, unrecognised, or excused as being the fault of the exploited (Carrington, Chatzidakis, and Shaw 2021).

We are going to examine the issue of exploitation on fan labour contextualised via the lens of cosplay within the games industry, and therefore, it is important to understand that slavery and exploitation can exist in advanced western societies and has seemingly been an issue for some time.

It is reasonably common knowledge that businesses will take political and economic advantage wherever they can in pursuit of their goal to maximise shareholder value. Reducing labour costs is a relatively easy way for businesses to assist in achieving that aim. Some methods of reducing labour costs include engaging in modern slavery and extreme labour exploitation. Labour costs are under increasing downwards pressure due to the power imbalance facilitated by the imperfect competitive conditions created by the monopsony power of employers in wages setting, arguably a method of exploitation (Card et al., 2016; Krueger & Posner, 2018), lobbying and political power is applied to governments with the aim of creating favourable regulations and environments for business profitability (Farnsworth, 2005) and again demonstrating the application of business power in the exploitation of labour.

In addition, the major western democracies are very supportive of the business sector. Therefore, it is no stretch to contend that western nation states tacitly facilitate slavery and exploitation. They do this firstly by allowing it in the supply and labour chain by not adequately legislating against it, and secondly, by failing to enforce said inadequate legislation (Christ et al., 2019; LeBaron & Phillips, 2019). It can almost be claimed that many western capitalist democracies have been captured by business interests that prefer some forms of slavery and exploitation to exist due to it facilitating lower wages costs for businessesⁱⁱ. It could thus be claimed that exploitation and slavery is a feature of capitalism rather than a bug (Carrington et al., 2021) This, unfortunately, is not new. It was claimed by Marx (1999) in his newspaper correspondence on the North American Civil War (1861-1865), a conflict deeply rooted in the issue of chattel slavery, that capitalists will always try to find a way to profit on the misfortune of others, including supporting slavery. It seems, as long as it improves the bottom line, then anything is acceptable under unfettered capitalism, including engaging with extreme exploitation of labour.

The nuanced exploitation of labour under capitalism is highlighted by Barrientos et al's (2013) suggestion that subtle manipulation mechanisms are used to guide people into unfree labour exploitation situations. Examples include systemic poverty, racially motivated redlining resulting in localised low education levels, low public transport availability (see Crane 2013) further resulting in an inability to leave the geographic area for education or better employment, economic pressure to accept any position available, large numbers of people competing for minimal jobs keeping wages low, and so on. Finally, capitalism conveniently ignores all forms of unfree labour exploitation (including the majority of gendered domestic labour) by spuriously claiming capitalism is all about the movement and sale of free labour, and therefore that any use of slavery or unfree labour is outside of the bounds or purview of capitalism; a glorified 'it can't happen here and if it does we had nothing to do with it' head-in-the-sand argument (Barrientos et al., 2013; Carrington et al., 2021).

A survey of the literature of slavery, labour exploitation, and various precarious work models revealed that much theoretical and practical work had been focused upon very specific third world labour cohorts, direct chattel slavery issues, corporate supply chain management and legal or government regulatory responses to said issues. However, the literature appears to pay minimal attention to first world cohorts, which whilst clearly not as impacted as third world slavery populations, are none the less exploited (Carrington et al., 2021). This seeming absence led to the authors proposing the question; 'How do affluent and informed fan labourers get into exploitation situations?' Which also begged the additional question, 'and subsequently how do they get out of those labour exploitation situations?' We examine fandom-based labour as a useful case study both of the games industry and the wider conditions that can lead to exploitation in affluent society due to their precarious nature, low pay and (unlike others that fit the first two conditions) lack of societal acceptance without crossing legal bounds (as compared to sex work for example).

Slavery is often only conceptualised and depicted as poor souls in chains, owned by others (known as chattel slavery). However, the concept of modern slavery encapsulates situations that are much broader and more nuanced than traditional chattel slavery. According to Crane (2013: 51) modern slavery is defined by being “(1) forced to work through threat; (2) owned or controlled by an "employer," typically through mental, physical, or threatened abuse; (3) dehumanized and treated as a commodity; and (4) physically constrained or restricted in freedom of movement.” For example, coercive slavery includes any situation in which an individual is coerced or forced into providing their labour without their choice due to pressure or similar tactics. An example of coercive slavery is the ‘dobkeeper’ program instituted by the Australian government; whereby those on unemployment benefit are required to take any job offered to them or lose their unemployment benefits; that is to say they have no choice and are coerced by the threat of lost benefits.

In this paper we do not specifically engage with modern slavery per se, but more with the broader concept of labour exploitation, which sometimes draws on properties similar to modern slavery.

SLAVERY MANAGEMENT CONDITIONS IN COSPLAY AS A FAN-BASED LABOUR

To examine fan-based labour in the games industry, we focused on the area of cosplay as a craft and profession that exemplifies aspects of both the passion and exploitation practices relevant to our argument. Cosplay is a portmanteau of costume play. In its most basic form cosplayers dress up in costume, but it is much more than just ‘dressing up’. Cosplayers create real world interpretations of often physics-defying costumes created in a game or CGI film world. Leading cosplayers have become skilled in pattern draughting, draping, corsetry, sewing, foamsmithingⁱⁱⁱ, leatherwork, electronics and mechanical engineering. Many cosplayers are now internationally known, highly-skilled craftspeople and artisans who are paid to construct and wear these costumes at pop culture conventions and similar events. Typically, they might be contracted by a pop culture convention to appear as a guest, to lead workshops on techniques, and to show off their latest creations. Likewise, they may be hired by a particular game developer to create costumes from their latest game in order to contribute to marketing efforts. Cosplayers, like many fan-based labourers, are gig workers on contract rather than employees. Halliday (2021, 3) defined gig work as,

“...any labor [sic] sold in response to discrete instances of consumer demand for the performance of specific and finite tasks. As such, gig work is paid in a piecemeal manner, for the completion of the relevant task rather than (say) the amount of time worked, often with no expectation that demand for further work will exist after the explicitly demanded task has been completed.”

Crane (2013) identified that the conditions within an industry are a driving influence as to whether slavery or extreme exploitation are present in that industry. Crane (2013) indicated that slavery and exploitation are most often found in “agriculture, mining and extraction, construction, and some forms of manufacturing, such as brickmaking and carpet weaving, as well as unregulated or poorly regulated service industries, particularly domestic work and sex work” (2013, 53–54). Crane (2013) found that slavery and extreme labour exploitation are more likely to be present where there was a high degree of manual labour, and small-scale businesses^{iv} that have low margins and struggle to capture profit. Both of these examples are widely evident in the cosplay industry, where high degrees of manual labour are present at nearly every stage of the production process, along with gig work industry conditions. However, cosplay and gaming deviate from Crane’s model in that Crane suggested that unskilled labour is also a feature, whilst clearly cosplay and computer gaming are skilled endeavours.

In line with Crane’s observation that slavery and exploitation tend to occur in low legitimacy industries such as sex work and domestic work, we propose that professional cosplay is a low legitimacy, gig industry, in that it is labour provided largely by gaming fans, is treated as ‘just a game’, and not ‘real work’ by the mainstream (Stanfill 2019b). In addition, as the majority of cosplayers are women, there is a heavy gendered labour bias which also acts to de-legitimise the cosplay profession (Duffy 2016).

Additionally, Crane (2013) claimed that poverty is the most pervasive and defining socioeconomic factor that drives slavery and acceptance of exploitation. For example, high unemployment and stagnant

wages creates job insecurity and fear (Stanford, Hardy, and Stewart 2018). For cosplay and other fan-based labour, workers might take jobs at low/illegal rates because they fear not taking it might lead to them losing the client to another artist or struggling to find future work due to being a ‘difficult’ supplier. Stanfill (2019a, 158) concurred, stating that “the convergence of labor-cost reduction by industry, rejection of capitalist projects by many fans, and the contemporary blurring of work and leisure produces a perfect storm that allows exploiting fan labor”. Stanfill (2019a) also noted that the reduction in unionisation, and related protections, has resulted in systematic reduction in labour costs in creative industries. It is important to note that in Australia, business and government have taken lobbying and policy positions that have over time eroded union power and resulted in significant structural wage stagnation (Stanford, Hardy, and Stewart 2018), which would certainly drive the fears of losing clients by not accepting the conditions first offered. In Australia this attitude is captured by common cultural rhetoric such as ‘dole bludgers’ deserve it or ‘get a real job’, since fan-based labour is not considered real work and often considered to be of inherently lower value due to it being perceived to be ‘women’s work’. Often cosplayers and other fan-based labourers are treated by the media as free labour or as a spectacle to be derided for other’s amusement.

For example, Channel 7 Australia’s ‘Sunrise’ programme (Sunrise 2017), aired in Sydney on Monday 6 March 2017, specifically invited anime cosplayers onto the show under the guise of a cultural exchange segment to then insult, bully and make fun of the cosplayers on a nationally syndicated prime time morning magazine format TV show.

Low education and illiteracy have been identified as common factors in the context of slavery and exploitation (Crane 2013; Barrientos, Kothari, and Phillips 2013). We contend that this isn’t limited to basic illiteracy; many people are not savvy about contract negotiations and can fall prey to predatory practices because they are financially illiterate (aka debt literacy) and as such don’t know how to negotiate or read a contract effectively (Emmons 2005).

The geographic circumstances of a population will influence the degree of slavery or exploitation (Chesney et al., 2019; Crane, 2013) such that high isolation and low mobility will permit exploitation of a geographically isolated population. Crane (2013) claimed that physical, political and psychological separation can also be considered in this category. We propose that social separation is also an issue. Anyone who is isolated can fall prey to victimisation and exploitation. Cosplayers, gamers and other fan-based labourers can be socially isolated and exist within the bubble of their own gaming sub-community. They often exist in isolated online communities and forums which, whilst not geographically isolated, tend to be within and apart from ‘regular’ society even when co-located. In addition, as workers in the gig economy, cosplayers don’t have unions or other support, as they are not seen as legitimate or treated as such.

It was further suggested by Crane (2013) that the cultural context, such as the attitudes of institutions and the existence of structural inequalities will facilitate slavery and exploitation. It seems labour exploitation is often a core component of capitalism, rewarding those who exploit their workers the most. Subtle manipulation and exploitation such as entrenched attitudes towards women in the workforce and views that fan labour is not real work, allow for the exploitation of professional fan-based labourers such as cosplayers.

Regarding the regulatory context, Crane suggests that a lax government or regulatory approach facilitates the existence of slavery and exploitation. Hollist (2015) examined labour and contract conditions in esports noting multiple instances of publishers and IP holders exploiting esports players via one sided contracts and similar legal labour exploitation. Christ et al. (2019) indicated that whilst many countries have a regulatory regime that prohibits slavery and extreme labour exploitation, often those regulatory requirements are ignored or not effectively enforced. For example, Australia rarely enforces the modern slavery regulations, preferring to allow a more self-governed approach to compliance. According to Christ et al (2019, p. 855), Australian companies reporting on modern slavery in their supply chains often obfuscate by only reporting generic issues and bribery:

“Where they do make disclosures the main focus is on bribery and corruption, human rights and generic slavery-related issues, rather than specific themes. Information, when provided, is of low quality being largely narrative and

descriptive of policy, rather than quantitative setting targets for how specific sub-themes of modern slavery might be addressed and what financial resources will be provided.”

As we can see from the above, there are several relevant contextual factors that facilitate the existence of slavery and extreme labour exploitation, even in affluent countries such as Australia. Cosplayers are generally considered to be part of an affluent global cohort, however they can still be prey to exploitative labour practices.

SLAVERY MANAGEMENT CAPABILITIES

The second set of factors that Crane (2013) identified were the four slavery management capabilities that allow slavery and extreme labour exploitation to prosper and survive (2013, 50). Crane identified these capabilities as exploiting, insulating, sustaining, and shaping. Slavery management capabilities all share an organisation context. Crane (2013, 61) characterised them as such in proposition six:

“Organizational-level exploiting and insulating capabilities (namely, access and deployment of violence, debt management, accounting opacity, and labor supply chain management) mediate the relationship between external conditions and the adoption of slavery practices”

According to Crane, “Exploiting and insulating capabilities are operational routines embedded in tacit knowledge about how to effect slavery within a given context.” (Crane 2013, 58–59). They are represented by tools such as overt and implied violence, debt and income management, labour supply chain management, and opaque and confusing accounting and contracting. Sustaining and shaping capabilities were described by Crane as the ability to establish favourable relationships and contexts to allow the exploitation to continue and to combat or counter any unfavourable contexts that arise to challenge their use of exploitative or slavery systems. Crane identified several of these sustaining and shaping capabilities. For example, the ‘denial of victim’ (refer to Carrington, Chatzidakis, and Shaw 2021), where the victim is cast as perpetrator, complicit, or deserving of their fate. Other examples include challenging threats to the exploitation that they benefit from (usually via the legal system) and encouraging support for their exploitative practices from external parties via political lobbying; couching the practices as traditional, business as usual, necessary for industry/business survival or attempting to define the exploitative activity as something other than exploitation.

THE EXPLOITATION ECOSYSTEM MODEL

In building the ExEc model [and being guided again by Caruana et al’s (2021) position that after several decades nothing much has happened in the discipline of modern slavery] the authors noted that most of the various models viewed modern slavery and exploitation from a single perspective, and that much work and effort was spent examining similar issues with similar outcomes. By carefully considering individual factors in the focused domain that we used for analysis (cosplay and third-party content producers in the games industry), we have created a model that provides greater utility and focus for a broad range of industries/domains where passion and intrinsic motivation are relevant factors (potentially any creative industry). We propose to take on board the individual’s perspective and the various pathways or factors that influence or facilitate both the individual’s entry and exit from labour exploitation. This is not to claim that the model is a grand unified theory, but that it takes an integrated view of the discipline as advised by both Barrientos et al. (2013) and Caruana et al. (2021).

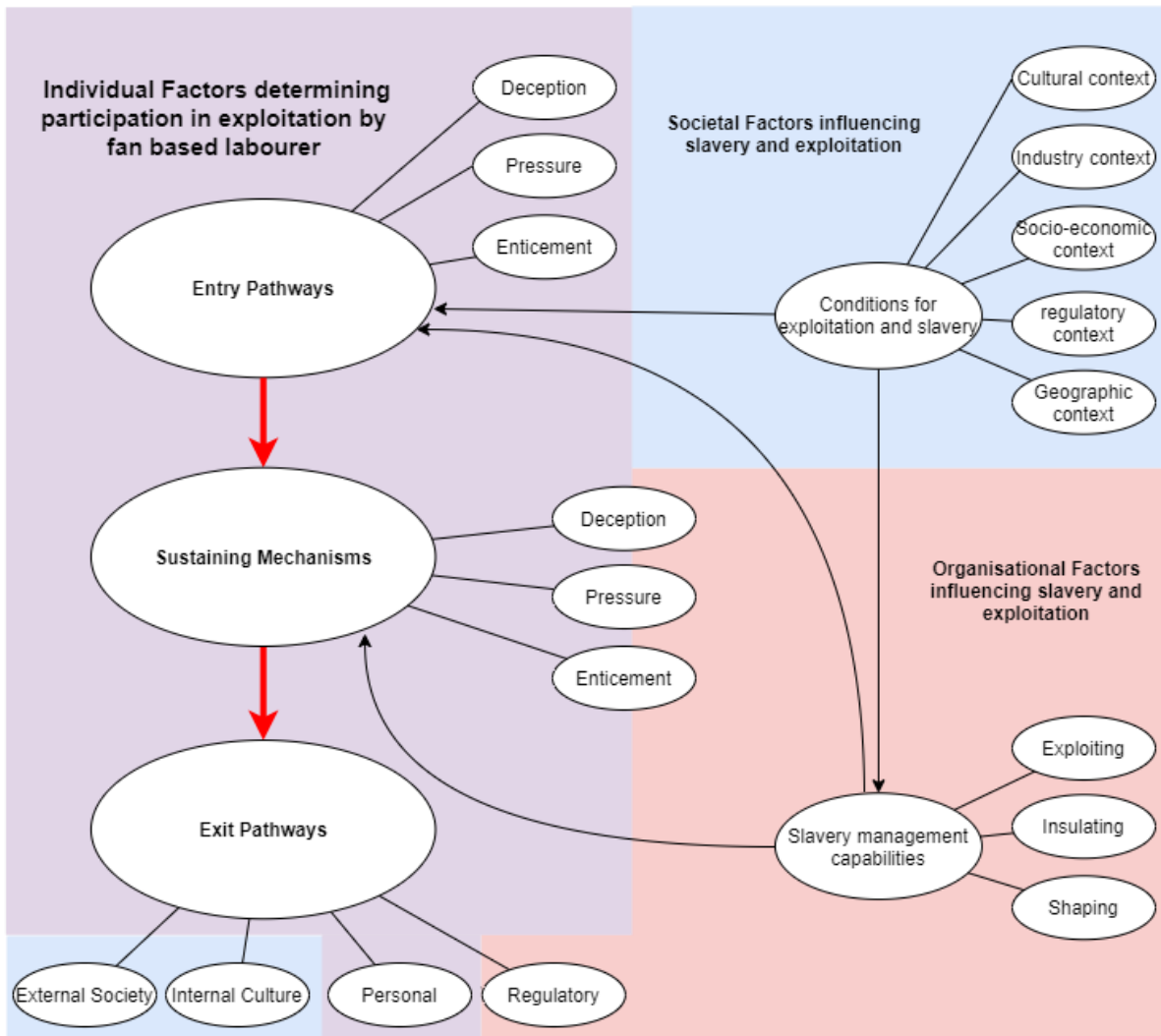


Figure 1: The Exploitation Ecosystem Model

The ExEc model in Figure 1 shows the connections between Crane’s (2013) view of modern slavery in the supply chain with the various entry pathways, sustaining mechanisms and exit pathways to exploitation in the fan labour industry. Our new model attempts to make sense of how seemingly (by global standards) affluent and well educated fan labourers such as gamers, cosplayers and esports participants can find their way into exploitative and modern slavery labour conditions.

The Exploitation Ecosystem (ExEc) model shows how the prevailing theoretical framework can be applied to fan-based labour by simplifying Crane’s original work and synthesizing work from other relevant sources. Crane’s (2013) model of modern slavery was presented in the context of management/supply chain practice. However, our model also draws upon existing research on exploitative labour practices including immaterial labour (Bulut 2015; Tangian 2007), above and below the line labour (Mayer 2011), aspirational or hope labour (Duffy 2016), Do What You Love (DWYL) (Tokumitsu 2014; Duffy 2016), precarious labour (Bulut 2015), and gendered labour exploitation (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2006; Duffy 2016) along with cosplay and fandom theory (Scott, 2015; Stanfill, 2019a, 2019b)

In developing the ExEc model we specifically considered Dyer-Witthford and du Peuter (2006) and Crane (2013). Dyer-Witthford and du Peuter (2006), identified the four E’s of labour exploitation in the gaming industry: Enjoyment (pleasure in the job), Exclusion (gendered workforce), Exploitation (extreme hours, stress and crunch forced by employers) and Exodus (escaping the situation – legal, unionizing, exiting the industry). The influence of Dyer-Witthford and du Peuter’s (2006) four E’s can be found in the three aspects of our proposed ExEc model – Societal factors, Organisational factors and

Individual factors. Crane (2013) alternatively identified societal factors as ‘conditions for exploitation and slavery’ and organisational factors as ‘slavery management capabilities’.

The ExEc model states that there is a third set of factors, in addition to societal and organisational, specifically ‘individual factors’ that influence and facilitate the exploitation of fan-based labourers. The ‘Individual Factors’ were identified based on the research of Barrientos et al (2013) and Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter (2006), supported by work conducted by others (Bulut, 2015; Carrington et al., 2021; Caruana et al., 2021; Chesney et al., 2019; Christ et al., 2019, 2020; Crane et al., 2019, 2021; Duffy, 2016; Ferguson, 2016, 2018; Ferguson & Veneziani, 2018; Fuchs, 2018; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Mayer, 2011; Rogerson et al., 2020; Tangian, 2007; Tokumitsu, 2014).

The model presented in this paper covers the first and second layers of the Exploitation Ecosystem. Future work will develop a third layer, with some elements from that layer provided as examples below.

ENTRY PATHWAYS TO EXPLOITATION

From the previous discussions we can see that there are three broad entry pathways to exploitation. These pathways are deception, enticement, and pressure. These entry pathways can be used to explain how relatively affluent westerners are ensnared into exploitative arrangements within the fan-based labour industry.

Barrientos et al (2013) indicated that there are often subtle mechanisms at play which entice (via personal pull mechanisms such as fandom or a desire for fame and attention) or push (e.g. social pressures from friends to help, or the sunk cost fallacy) the fan labourer into a precarious and exploitative position. Halliday (2021, 4) suggests that “the tendency to drive down wages is undeniable for any device that removes barriers to entry for labor...”. Therefore, regardless of any ‘evil’ intent on the part of fandom IP holders/businesses, they reduce the cost of their labour when they use fandom levers or power to promote the entry of fans into the fandom labour pool (Stanfill 2019b; 2019a). As a consequence of using this fandom based power, the IP holders reduce the cost of all fan-based labour in the process.

Often fan-based labourers are deceived into entering exploitative labour conditions. For example, they might be led to believe the employment or labour situation is different to what it actually is. Deception can also include the ‘do what you love’(DWYL) movement (Duffy 2016; Tokumitsu 2014), where labourers are deceived into thinking that because they enjoy a task it should be its own reward and thus paid less; “if you do what you love you’ll never work a day in your life” (Duffy 2016; Tokumitsu 2014). Fan-based labourers are passionate and motivated to create to celebrate their fandom. Stanfill (2019b) indicated that fan labour is recognised by intellectual property rights holders as adding value to their IP and exploited by IP holders accordingly. However, fan producers are trained to accept that their efforts are not canon or are derivative (FanFic and FanArt) or ‘it’s fun’ and thus the fan labourers aren’t compensated as much as other workers.

Enticement makes the labour activity seem more attractive than other forms of compensated activity. The fan labourer is enticed by bright lights, fame or other ‘grass is greener’ pull mechanisms. Within fan labour this is the largest and most prominent mechanism. Enticement can also take the form of aspirational or hope labour, where fan-based labourers aspire or hope to enter the industry of their dreams and see providing low-cost labour as an entry point to that eventual career (Duffy 2016). A detailed example of enticement are ‘Noobs’, which refers to new entrants into the cosplay and esports gaming industry. New entrants to the industry are excited to be there, however they generally have little to no idea what they are doing in terms of business management or acumen. They are excited to be paid and undercut established professionals to get their foot in the door (penetration pricing strategy). Companies seem happy to exploit this excitement and naivety. Generally, after a few years of not being paid properly, or after graduating from university, this cohort exits the market, to be replaced by a new crop of noobs. Noobs are not noobs forever, they learn, or they leave.

Further examples of the enticement mechanism include exceptionalism, where cosplayers are treated as being exceptional or different compared to others. Also. in lieu of financial or other tangible benefits, there is the enticement of being famous within the community. Fans can be pulled into the labour space when they want to be a creative part of their fandom and interact with the IP creators/holders.

Additionally, hobbyists who have sunk considerable time and financial resources into cosplay are sometimes enticed to ‘turn pro’ to recoup some of those costs. Hobby to Pro is slightly different to aspirational or hope labour as the aspirant always starts with professionalism in mind, whilst the hobbyist switches later in the process.

Even in affluent societies there are pressure/push mechanisms to enter into exploitative labour models. Barrientos et al. (2013) identifies that there are subtle pressures such as family and duty that can be leveraged to force people into exploitative conditions. In the case of fan-based labour only a single pressure pathway could be identified: ‘only you can help’.

The ‘Only you can help’ pressure pathway represents pressure from friends, family, businesses and or others to assist with the fan-based labour. Social pressure puts the cosplay or esports fan labourer into the position of feeling that they have no choice but to comply and enter the exploitative arrangement. This social pressure is usually achieved with cajoling comments such as ‘only you have the skill to help’ or ‘only you have the ability to do this’. This can also be considered as a sustaining mechanism, as the social pressure can be applied to retain (low cost) labourers.

SUSTAINING MECHANISMS OF EXPLOITATION

Similar to the entry mechanisms, the sustaining factors can be organised into the three categories of deception, pressure and enticement. While the category names are the same, the application is different in a sustaining context. This could be regarded as a matrix, where the categories both inform and are informed by the context of whether the fan labourer is entering into or currently in an exploitation situation. Much like the entry pathways, these three sustaining mechanisms are applied in similar manners to keep the individual engaged in the exploitative situation. Many of the sustaining mechanisms were first proposed by Crane (2013), however additional sustaining mechanisms were identified in the process of building the ExEc model, e.g. from the work of Barrientos et al (2013) and Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2006). Sustaining mechanisms are the most prominent. It would seem, much like customer service management, it is more expensive to attract a new customer than to maintain a current one. Therefore it makes sense that sustaining mechanisms – methods of keeping low cost labourers engaged in their task – are important in the ExEc model.

Examples of deception mechanisms include the moral legitimisation practices and debt/income management practices detailed by Crane (2013). Fan-based labourers can be deceived into believing that the practice is legitimate and there is nothing that they can do but accept the situation. Under the debt/income management banner, fan-based workers are not privy to the full suite of entitlements, payments and charges levied against them in the context of their employment situation. For example, there are often hidden but mandatory charges for hotel accommodation and meals levied as part of the employment contract.

Another example of deceptive practices is an ‘appeal to higher loyalty’. In this practice the intellectual property owner appeals to the individual’s loyalty and passion for the fandom as a mechanism to source lower priced labourers (often volunteers). Many fans exhibit a diminished rational capacity towards aspects of their fandom, often to the point of hysteria and other similar extreme emotions. It is in this context that the fan labourer is encouraged to participate at low pay rates because the opportunity to work on their fandom, and fulfil their dream, is viewed as sufficient recompense. Stanfill (2019b, 133) noted that within fan spaces, labour is captured and exploited under the guise of doing something else more pleasurable, and that the exploited capture of labour value is often disguised entirely:

“In the case of industry and fans, this can be reframed as, ‘Let fans make a bunch of stuff and then we’ll exploit the free content we like best.’”

Enticement encapsulates the mechanisms that encourage fan-based labourers to remain in exploitative arrangements. As indicated in the previous section, examples include exceptionalism; where cosplayers are treated as being special or different and start to think that they are special and above exploitation, and that it cannot happen to them because they are famous.

Pressure mechanisms are those that put undue pressure on the participant to remain within the exploitative arrangement. These include those identified by Crane (2013) such as debt and income

management, and delegitimization of opposition. For example, this might include lobbying government to stop tightening up employment regulations, or convincing government instead to allow for industry self-regulation. A pertinent Australian example is that quite recently (1 July 2021) Victoria was the first state in Australia to make wages theft by an employer a criminal offence. Another example is self-reinforcing fan-based culture, which often has the effect of the fandom policing itself into exploitation, such as when professional cosplayers are accused of being ‘sell-outs’.

According to Crane (2013) a subtle but effective mechanism for retaining exploited labour is debt and income management. In debt management workers are charged fees for their employment/advancement and these fees quickly outpace the workers ability to earn, thus binding the employee/worker to the role as they never earn enough to reduce the debt. In fandom labour these might include anecdotally reported debt incurring items such as headshots^v, official merchandise/prop requirements for a cosplay photo shoot^{vi}, licensing^{vii}, airline and entry ticket prices, accommodation fees, food and beverage fees such as lunches and dinners provided to the cosplayer (all for convention appearances), and so on.

There are several other examples such as being paid in ‘Exposure dollars’, which is often deployed on new or lower profile cosplayers. This is the idea that a cosplayer or esports player can have their profile improved by their involvement in the activity, and therefore that exposure is a suitable replacement for monetary remuneration. Many cosplayers and esports participants just accept this as ‘the price of getting noticed’ and achieving ‘cut through’.

In addition, ‘the Company Store’ is an old (and now illegal) 1920’s mining industry sustaining mechanism re-invented for the new digital landscape (Angel and McCabe 2015). Recently it has been revealed (People Make Games 2021) that companies such as Roblox have been paying developers in Robux (Roblox’s in-game currency) and that there is severe difficulty in removing/converting Robux into legal currency due to buy/sell disparity (\$1000 of Robux to buy but only \$350 if converted back into currency), and minimum payout layers (\$1000). This ‘company store’ mechanism tends to retain developers on their platform and keeps payouts to a minimum due to the disparity in the cash-out currency conversion.

EXIT PATHWAYS OUT OF EXPLOITATION

Four exit pathways are identified in the ExEc model: personal, internal culture, external society and regulatory. These are the pathways by which exploited fan-based labourers can cease being exploited. These are not necessarily about no longer being fan-based labourers or third-party community content creators (although that is one avenue for exit).

Personal exit pathways consist of the individual’s personal decisions to no longer be exploited. In general, these mechanisms are predominantly associated with the withdrawal of labour from the fan-based labour pool. Examples include burnout, abandonment and retirement, and exit to industry (Dyer-Witford and de Peuter 2006), where the individual labourer explicitly removes themselves from the fandom labour pool. This removal may be temporary, for example though they may exit due to burnout, the labourer remains in their fandom and thus may return to the labour pool once the burnout has passed. While burnout is often a temporary state, it may turn into permanent abandonment where the fan labourer exits the fandom entirely. With retirement, the fan labourer stays within their fandom, but ceases their participation in the labour pool. Likewise, the fandom labourers often remove their labour by ‘graduating’ into the industry they had hoped to enter via their fandom work. There are of course very few fan-based labourers who manage to achieve this transition. Generally, success stories have been more commonly observed in the streaming, film, games, events and esports industries. They would include roles such as professional streamer, professional media, trainer, events producers, community manager, content creator, costume cutter, costume designer, purchaser and so on.

The regulatory exit pathway captures cases where government regulations intervene to stop the exploitation. Government regulation can include the establishment and enforcement of legislation such as the United Kingdom’s Modern Slavery Act 2015 (HM Government 2015) and Australian Modern Slavery Act 2018 (Commonwealth of Australia 2018) or improvements in local labour laws that extend protections to gig workers.

The internal culture exit pathway captures examples where workplace culture evolves into a non-exploitative model. This pathway includes examples such as standardisation or greater transparency of payment rates and unionisation, and is often seen in conjunction with external social pressure which forces the workplace culture to adapt to these external social and regulatory norms, as reflected in the final category: external society. This explicitly encapsulates cases where external social pressure mounts upon the organisation or sector to cease one or more of the exploitative practices exhibited within the industry. Examples of the external society exit pathway include the #metoo movement, ‘cosplay is not consent’ and community action such as boycotts and Twitch ‘do better days’.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

Although, at this stage, the Exploitation Ecosystem model was designed with a focus on cosplayers as fan-based labourers, the authors believe it can be applied to other fan-based labourers and possibly the wider affluent western society labour force to explain the mechanisms of exploitation in such societies. At this stage, this paper only details the first and second layers of the model. Through future work, the authors hope to empirically validate and expand upon these layers and their relevant factors, and subsequently share the more detailed model with academia and relevant industries for further consideration and public discourse. Ultimately, we aim for this work to stimulate discussion of modern slavery and extreme labour exploitation in affluent fan-based labour spaces, enrich relevant theoretical models, and lead to greater empowerment of creative labour forces.

Predominantly, analysis of exploitation and modern slavery has focused on third world and manual labourers. Whilst this paper acknowledges that the worst examples of exploitation and slavery occur in these spaces, we argue that it is simultaneously worthwhile exploring exploitation and slavery in more affluent societies, and that exploitation is exploitation, no matter who is being exploited.

ⁱ “New (2015) has suggested that labor [sic] supply chains have been largely overlooked, with SCM scholars prioritizing flows of commodities, rather than people (see also Allain et al., 2013). The suggestion that modern slavery is linked to the supply chain of workers as well as the supply chain of materials may go some way to explain why modern slavery may evade traditional supply chain mapping techniques (Crane et al., 2019; New, 2015).” (Caruana et al. 2021, 258)

ⁱⁱ For example, the Australian government’s recently announced farm labour visa.

ⁱⁱⁱ Foamsmithing is using EVA foam and thermoplastics to create semi rigid armour

^{iv} Professional cosplayers generally operate as either sole traders or in small units. Likewise in the gaming industry whilst there are many large studios, increasingly these studios outsource piecemeal work to smaller production houses who take on the work at very low margins (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2006)

^v In this case the headshot is done by their preferred photographer. In most cases when this occurs the contractor is also charging the photographer for the referral, so they get a taste of both transactions.

^{vi} In this example the cosplayer is paid for their involvement in the photo shoot/booth time but must outlay to purchase or rent official merchandise or props to complete their cosplay. The props are usually provided by the contractor and either leased (via fee reduction) or purchased outright by the cosplayer. The transaction is usually passed off as a requirement of the job and the rental fee justified as an indemnity against damage to the prop.

^{vii} The fan-based labourer or cosplayer must be officially trained, licensed, or certified to work with that IP. This usually involves a fee for the license, training, or certification.

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