Player as Medium: Games of Mid(dle) Management

This paper analyzes narrative patterns in a subgenre of games I call Futile Governor Simulators (FGSs). Examples include leth's *Descending* and Bippinbits's *PVKK: Planetenverteidigungskanonenkommandant* (IGN). (David Szymanski's *Iron Lung* is a close precursor.) In an FGS, a player operates a machine whose goals are evil. The player thus plays a component, a medium of force, within a self-tormenting sociotechnical system.

FGS narratives adapt the Lovecraftian trajectory of ill-rewarded learning, familiar also from 1970s conspiracy thrillers like *The Parallax View*. A player/protagonist explores deeper and deeper infrastructure of their society and consequently incurs punishment. Thus, FGSs offer a critique of the neoliberal quandary of limited agency that Gillian Welch ponders in a certain lyric: "Never minded working hard. It's who I'm working for."

To theorize how FGSs structure player experience, I synthesize the two canonical meanings of the word "ergodic." One meaning comes from Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext*, in which *ergos* refers to the work required by a reader, now player, to traverse a text. An ergodic text is nontrivially difficult to get through, and the notion of ergodicity thus affords a criterion for gameplay. The games-as-ergodic theory supported the conservative gamer ethic that to give narrative rewards, a game should require players to "get good." Yet since GamerGate, a reclaimed and more ergonomic genre of "walking simulators" has challenged the centrality of *ergos* to gameness (see Kagen). In contrast, mathematicians have offered a second, earlier, definition of ergodicity, cited, for example, in Claude Shannon's foundational mathematical theory of communication. Multiple paths are "ergodic" when contained in the same boundaries. (They “approach definite limits independent of the particular sequence;” Shannon 391.)

Converging these two definitions, I derive a description of neoliberal middle management. According to "self-determination theory," employees are more motivated who feel a sense of ownership of the work they do (Deci). Crucially, the "sense of" is not real, or at least not ruling. The self-determination of an employee does not translate to power with a corporation or its resources, only to choice as feeling, as impotentiated phenomenon. The possibility of offering others the motivational feeling of choice, without a need to give the dangerous opportunity to choose systemic change, proved wantonly desirable in management thought. A cluster of theories surrounding self-determination have tried to transmute work into play by creating opportunities to feel playful while completing controlled tasks, hence the anti-emancipatory importance of notions such as "flow" in the gig economy. (See Soderman.)

Following the insight, from cultural studies, that subcultures (and thus subgenres) work at the contradictions in their parent cultures—an insight prefigured by John Dewey's theory that a public forms through discourse around shared problems—I argue for the FGS as an articulation of the horror that neoliberal subjects feel at having become the very media, the human resources, of the daily operations of systems that already seem morally compromised and that promise to seem yet more morally compromised given any available avenue of questioning. Like nearby horror games such as germfood's *Night of the Consumers* and even Scott Cawthon's *Five Nights at Freddies*, an FGS is a burlesque of work patterns.

While I celebrate the political logic of the FGS as a mode of critical art, I also critique how the FGS reinstantiates a type of limited criticality typical of critical art. By enclosing a player's ambitions, FGSs offer what Paul Mann calls "anethics," moral abstention (through aesthetics as intensified anaesthetics; Mann 195). Sometimes, escapism involves the escape, from precarity, given by the secure realization that you cannot escape. In contrast, games such as

Sunset Visitor's *1000xRESIST*, which strive to frame players' choices as consequential, and even strive to make those consequences open-ended, remain important as attempts at an ongoing dialectic of narrative structure (and its limitation of the in-game effects of gameplay choices) with the utopia of a phenomenally copious possibility space.

Author's Statement

Matthew Horrigan is a communications instructor at Alexander College and a doctoral candidate at Simon Fraser University (to complete in spring 2025). Matt studies systems of media production, is dissertating about the movie business of "Hollywood North," and has published in *Game Studies*, *M/C Journal*, and *Sound Studies* and presented at the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts and the Canadian Game Studies Association, among other venues. In earlier activity, Matt received an MFA from Simon Fraser University and a B.Mus from McGill University related to an artistic practice in electroacoustic music. The present work extends Matt's ongoing research interest in the relationships between games as control systems and leisure.

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The 2025 International Conference on Games and Narrative presents:

Adapt, Adopt, Adjust: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Adaptation, Storytelling, and Simulation

Author's Statement

My name is Anushka Sharma (she/they) and I am a second year Master's student of English and Cultural Studies at CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bannerghatta Road Campus, Bengaluru, India. Having explored a multiplicity of avenues through an Under-graduate degree in Liberal Arts (English Hons.), my primary research interests focus on visual culture, cinema, literature, intersectionality, and masculinity studies. I am a published poet, a Kathak dancer, and an avid consumer of all things art and pop-culture. I have presented papers in National-level conferences, the recent one being *"De-Bait: Analysing Progressive Queer Representations in Shimanami Tasogare and Skip to Loafer"* at Sister Nivedita University, Kolkata. Hereafter, my plans are to pursue a PhD to further my journey in academia.

Research Paper Title

"The Gamification, Commodification and Cutesification of Everyday: Gacha Games and the Posthuman Imagination"

Abstract

There is a subtle ease with which games have become increasingly accessible and pervasive in our lives with the progress of technology. Leaving the stencil carved by the "Sims" real-life simulation game behind, gacha games took our screens by a storm, becoming one of the most popular genres of gaming presently. They function on models that gamify real life activities like working, cooking, camping, and so on into both everyday and fantastical settings. These games utilize the instrument of gachapon machine or vending machine, encouraging players to spend money in-game on thematic/seasonal collections (Christmas, Halloween, Autumn specific) or limited-edition items. A novel aspect of these games is on the rise lately which brands them as comfy, cozy, cute, and therefore, relaxing (Che & Feng, 2023). This approach derives the players' interest by making use of their real-life burnout and promising an environment of slow-paced comfort living.

Through the emerging ideas in the field of Cute Studies, Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry, and Donna Haraway's conceptualization of the cyborg, this paper aims to address how gacha games have created a posthuman reality, which while guaranteeing an escape from the mundane, draws users into the same world of commodification and material relations. These "cozy" games are made up of somber color palettes with an art style that produces characters, objects, and settings that resemble the rounded outlines of chibi cartoons from Japan. The emerging scholarship within Cute Studies suggests that these aspects form the

hallmark of gimmicks that capture the human eye and attention (Dale, 2016), veiling the underlying mechanisms behind a *kawaii* front. Providing avenues of exploring limited yet alluring worlds in the form of miniature humans or animals, it allows one to inhabit a self that is severed from the real yet very much embodying one's performance of the everyday (Woods, 2024). This can be dissected using Haraway's exploration of the posthuman identity in the digital space. Both these streams of ideas offer a vast ground of study into the culture industry specific to mobile gaming when employing the criticism forwarded by Adorno and Horkheimer, especially in the era where we are both producers and consumers of popular culture.

The study follows the methods of visual analysis, participant observation, and interviews with gacha game players in order to grasp the layers of visible impact in tandem with theory. The paper particularly takes into consideration games by Kurechii, Hyper Beard, and MiHoYo. It looks at how the branding of "cute and cozy games" lulls consumers into a false sense of escapism while reproducing the same conditions in an aestheticized pastel palette.

Keywords: gacha, gamification, capitalism, posthumanism, cultural studies, cute studies

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Ludic Play to Ludic Pay: Blockchain Games as Cultural and Market Economies

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Author Statement

Daniel Kim (BSc, University of Toronto, MA, New York University) is a PhD Candidate in media studies at the University of Massachusetts and a Junior Fellow at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto. His wide-ranging research interests include the histories and theories of communication technologies and techniques, and he is completing a dissertation on blockchain technologies. As a visiting researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, Daniel conducted scholarly research and also led research and strategy for two different prosocial technology projects (combatting misinformation and connecting struggling students with tutors). His publications include essays in *Technology & Culture*, *Proceedings of IEEE TALE*, *Mass Communication & Society*, *ACM SIGITE*, and the *Digital Humanities Review* (in press), and he has delivered presentations at a number of conferences, including the Society for the Social Study of Science, the International Communication Association, the National Communication Association, and the Cultural Studies Association.

Abstract

The rise of blockchain games may represent a transformative shift in both gaming and economic landscapes. Combining play, decentralized technology, and financial systems, these games offer players the opportunity to earn real-world income while engaging in interactive entertainment (Min et al., 2019). This ongoing project examines the changing narratives surrounding blockchain games among developers and players, focusing on *Axie Infinity* as a case study to explore implications for entertainment, social relations, and economic systems. By employing the concept of 'ludic economies,' I argue that game studies must move beyond the traditional focus on ludic play or narratives within games (Anderson, 2013) to encompass the broader dynamics of economic systems embedded and embodied in gameplay (e.g., Wark, 2013). Blockchain games, exemplified by *Axie Infinity*, introduce play-to-earn (P2E) mechanics through decentralized ownership of in-game assets and token economies. Players in *Axie Infinity* breed, trade, and battle virtual creatures called Axies, earning cryptocurrency tokens (SLP and AXS) in the process (Sky Mavis, 2021). Promising financial empowerment, especially for players in economically disadvantaged regions, the developers position the game as a tool for social mobility and equitable economic opportunities (Lai, et al., 2023).

However, *Axie Infinity* also highlights the complexities and contradictions of blockchain gaming. Despite its utopian promises to help players escape traditional hierarchies of labor and wealth distribution, it often reproduces them. Moreover, its reliance on speculative market dynamics raises questions about economic sustainability and fairness. Competing narratives of

empowerment and exploitation reveal the dual nature of blockchain games as sites of both opportunity and inequality (Chow & Guzman, 2022). By situating *Axie Infinity* firmly and soberly within a framework of ludic economies, we can see how blockchain integration extends capitalist logics into video games. Decentralized blockchain technologies enable new forms of financial agency, but they also introduce speculative risks and systemic inequalities, reflecting broader socio-economic dynamics (Giddings & Harvey, 2018). Blockchain games are arguably reflections of broader capitalist structures and reshape narratives around labor, value, and social relations in digital spaces. Understanding these dynamics is essential for grasping the transformative potential and challenges posed by blockchain games.

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Generative Games as Situated Representations of Algorithmic Power

Craig Fahner

Documenting a series of games that customize user experience through generative algorithmic processes, this paper argues that interactive video games are a uniquely effective medium by which the individualizing mechanisms of algorithms and platforms can be conveyed to public audiences. Contemporary life is increasingly shaped and governed by highly complex and inscrutable algorithmic networks, which operate via social media platforms and algorithmic news feeds. Within this situation, each individual platform user is presented with a highly personalized view of the world, within which there is no necessary shared worldview from person to person. The formation of these so-called "filter bubbles" (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 42) has been studied in terms of its detrimental effects on public discourse and democracy (Bechmann and Nielbo 2018, 991). As these negative social effects increase, there is an urgent need to produce media artifacts that aid the public in understanding how algorithmic data collection and recommendation systems capture and enclose users.

In order to meet this demand, a significant question emerges: how can we represent something that cannot be observed objectively? Since algorithmic recommendation systems produce entirely different media environments for each user, a form of situated representation is necessary to effectively represent the mechanisms by which such systems capture and orient users on an individual basis. This paper argues that video games are an ideal medium for this form of situated representation. Video games allow users a great deal of agency in determining their own paths through complex and indeterminate environments. When combined with generative processes which can create a unique, responsive environment for each user, video game navigation can serve as an effective tool that can reveal and orient participants in relation to the dynamic and evolving environments of algorithmic enclosures. Situated representations of this kind work to invert the tendency of platforms to keep their politics hidden, instead making what is deliberately hidden emphatically visible or experiential. In this sense, video games that illustrate the logic of algorithmic power function as cognitive maps (Jameson 1991, 51) that work to disalienate the individual by providing them a sense of their own position within systems of technological enclosure.

I document this concept of the situated representation using two video games that I have contributed to as a collaborator as cases. The first, DEEP SOLUTIONS, is a VR experience that generates a navigable environment from each individual user's Facebook profile, revealing the ways that the platform captures data based on user behaviour and uses that data to profile the user for the purposes of targeted advertising. The second, DEEP DIVE, extends this concept in the form of a browser-based video game. In this game, a GPT2-based machine learning backend monitors the player's actions, generating objects, text and images in relation to everything they have looked at. In doing so, this game replicates the mechanisms of algorithmic recommendation and targeted advertising on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which notoriously monitor micro-gestures like glances and process them into detailed profiles based on the user's fears and desires (Andrejevic 2012, 92). In both of these examples, video games are leveraged as a form of situated representation which aims to engender players with a critical perspective on how sociality is shaped and captured by algorithms.

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