

The Corruption of Play

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The Corruption of Play: Mapping the Ideological Play-Space of AAA Videogames

BY

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For Colette and Charlotte

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About the Author

Christopher McMahon completed his Doctoral thesis at the University of Liverpool in 2020. His research covers neoliberalism, ideological components of the videogame medium, and the mediation of football. He is currently a Lecturer in Digital Media and Culture at the University of Liverpool.

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Introduction

The idea for this book came partly from the misery that is induced by being an Evertonian. I regularly attended football matches at Goodison Park several managers and dozens of players ago. I was always in the same seat with the same groups of people who sat near me so I would frequently overhear their conversations. I realised that a group of young teenagers on the row in front of me and two men who sat behind me often spoke about the videogames they played. Prior to the start of one match in 2017, the group of teenagers in front of me were discussing the weaknesses of the then Everton player Davy Klaassen. I realised that they were talking about the digital representation of the footballer in the *FIFA 18* (2017) videogame, specifically in the Ultimate Team mode,¹ rather than the literal man himself. The group were noting that he was not worth the investment of coins it would take to purchase Klaassen's card and that it was not useful to have him in the team, despite one of the individuals claiming that they liked the player. One of teenagers was also jokingly chastised by their companions for including a Liverpool footballer in their team, despite being an Evertonian. During football matches after this, the group would continue to talk about the Ultimate Team mode in *FIFA 18* as well as use the *FIFA 18* companion app on their phones, which allowed them to manage their team in Ultimate Team mode and trade player cards even when they were not seated at their consoles playing the videogame. Coincidentally, my first match at Goodison post-COVID restrictions was on the 7 November 2021 in a different seat than normal and two teenagers who sat in front of me were *playing* Ultimate Team mode on their phone. I took this as a sign that my arguments in this book are completely and utterly correct, or that Everton have played mind numbing football for years. It is probably the latter.

¹Ultimate Team mode is currently the most engaged with way of playing the *FIFA* videogames. The mode requires the player to collect cards that represent different professional footballers that they then use to make teams. The player can then use these teams to play other players or against the AI on their console of choice. The player is rewarded with coins for playing or meeting objectives. These coins can then be spent on packs which contain random player cards or buy specific cards off a transfer market. The player can also use real money to purchase the packs containing players.

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At another match at Goodison Park in the same year, the two men that sat behind me mentioned the *grind*² involved in qualifying for what is known as the Weekend League within the Ultimate Team mode. To merely qualify for the Weekend League, a player of *FIFA 18* had to either win four consecutive games in a daily knockout tournament, be ranked in division one,³ or have ranked in the gold rankings of the previous Weekend League. This reminded me of an article in Eurogamer⁴ commenting on the Weekend League, which suggested that qualifying for and playing in the Weekend League requires ‘punishing time commitment’ and is a highly ‘stressful’ game mode (Yin-Poole, 2017). It also seemed to confirm some of the key arguments of my research, in that many videogames differ from conventional ideas that gaming is a way of leisurely spending time. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, part of this may have been misplaced annoyance of watching Everton, but the discussion of videogames and the frustration caused by them continued.

Indeed, at a later football match, one of the men spoke about having played the Weekend League games and it being a taxing and time-consuming experience having taken up their whole Saturday. Despite the time commitment and draining nature of the play, the man pronounced that he had achieved a ‘Gold 3’ ranking, specifically stating ‘I’m Gold 3 lad!’ to his friend. There was evident pride in attaining something from this competitive and taxing game mode. The friend was impressed both with the amount of effort and the competence this required to achieve.

Hearing people talk about videogames was nothing especially new, but it was the language used in these discussions that struck me the most, specifically how each spoke about the play involved. The first group were averse to the prospect of including Davy Klaassen’s digital representation in their teams because it would limit their ability to perform well. One of the individuals commented that it is not ‘worth’ including the player. Despite liking the player, they indicated they were prioritising something else over their own feelings towards who they would want in the team, including opting for a player from a rival team. The efficiency of the team was more crucial than their own feelings towards the digital avatars used. Their use of the companion app indicated that the videogame could be engaged with without necessarily being *played*, raising questions of where the game and the space outside it began and ended. Then the two who men sat behind me used words and phrases like ‘grinding’, ‘tough work’, and ‘shattering’ to describe the

²A term used in gaming that infers doing repetitive (often unenjoyable) tasks to achieve something or reach a certain end.

³This would have to be done by winning multiple matches over a period and being promoted to division one out of a total of 10 divisions. Each individual match is designated to last around 12 minutes but would normally take longer. For example, if the player were in division two they would need to acquire 18 points from a maximum of 10 matches with 3 points being awarded for a win, 1 point for a draw, and 0 points for a loss.

⁴A reputable videogame journalism website launched in 1999.

process of playing a videogame. At one point, one of the men stated that he ‘hated’ *FIFA 18*, despite putting in many hours of play. The only time they seemed happy about the videogame was when one could state ‘I’m Gold 3 lad!’; the ability to declare that something can be gained from this arduous task seemed to be the entire point of the misery it induced. In both instances, it seemed that there were factors beyond enjoyment that were motivating the play of the videogame.

Thinking more about how videogames are discussed (and to maybe stop singling out *FIFA*), I realised that my own friends that I spoke to about videogames would be more likely to complain about the nature of what they had to do in videogames than what they enjoyed. An example is a friend who spent hours collecting items in *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* (2015) to attain the achievements related to the items. They emphasised how boring it was, but they felt compelled to do it to get the in-game boosts and achievements related to it. Motivating factors for the play of videogames can be complex but it appeared odd that hatred and a feeling of the task being laborious consistently featured in what people said.

I reflected upon my own time playing videogames from this, knowing that I tended to buy the *FIFA* videogames every year as they were released. Thinking more consciously about my own motivations and emotions as I next played the game I felt similar emotions to the ones I heard expressed at Goodison Park. I shared a triumphant social media post when I got an extremely valuable player card known as an ‘Icon’ in a pack. The player depicted by the card was Roberto Carlos and I was incredibly excited about the value of this card both in terms of how much better it could make my team and the coins that could be made through its sale. I thought about how my team could then be more competitive and became confident about the fact I could aim to qualify for the Weekend League, and if I had managed this I would likely have shared this on social media too. I know I would have done this as in another videogame, *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game* (2018), I reached what is known as Pro Rank⁵ and posted about this on social media. I made a specific note of this achievement highlighting the fact that I was a pro-ranked player, effectively declaring what it made me to anyone who would listen.

I had the *FIFA 18* companion app on my phone like the people at Goodison Park. I would use this outside of my time playing the videogame to better prepare my team. I most often used this app whilst at work (if you are my employer reading this, I obviously mean on my break at work). I would engage with the videogame outside of actually playing it because it would make my play more efficient. On the other hand, my smart phone also often alerts me of emails relating to my job as I play videogames, so it feels even more apparent that distinct realms of labour and leisure are in a state of collapse. It is not just labour bleeding into leisure, it is leisure becoming more like labour and utilising the same technologies

⁵Pro Rank in *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game* (2018) is the top ranking in the videogame. This rank is designated for the best players of the game to be able to play each other. And trust me I am ashamed of this.

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and networks. To be honest about my own feelings towards *FIFA 18*, I would say that I did not enjoy it and I fully understood the sentiment of the two men at Goodison Park who hated the videogame. I kept playing this despite this hatred, though, as it offered me something, the ability to declare I was good at it. Similarly, with *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game*,⁶ I stopped regularly playing a month after I reached Pro Rank as I became stressed about maintaining my ranking and realised I was not enjoying the play of the videogame. I tried to remember what moments of play I really enjoyed or gave me a meaningful experience since reaching the higher ranks and all I could think of were moments in which I had a status inferred on me by the game, attained an achievement, or done something which I could share on social media. Once I had reached Pro Rank I felt like the videogame could offer me nothing else, as if it was an exchange I was partaking in for my own betterment.

I started the Introductory chapter to this book with these few anecdotes from my observation of other people talking about videogames and from reflecting on my experience of playing because they highlight in no uncertain manner what I perceive to be a contradiction at the heart of videogame playing; one that motivated me to undertake this project. I thought videogame play should be different from what my and other people's experiences are, especially in reference to play within a AAA videogaming context. Joy can still undoubtedly be found in AAA videogames but the elements of playing that make it feel laborious are surely a cause for concern in a world in which work is becoming ubiquitous. AAA is understood to mean *A lot of time, A lot of money, A lot of resources* (or something to that effect) and refers to a categorisation of big budget videogames. The term emerges from both the industry and the wider gaming community. It is highlighted in academic literature that AAA is not a 'rigid' definition when applied to videogames and the AAA classification when applied infers distinctive characteristics relating to numbers of developers, prestige of the studio and publisher, and budget (Matthew and Wearn, 2016, pp. 24–25).

How and why has time playing videogames been increasingly bleeding into areas of everyday life that have nothing to do with playing and, conversely, how and why has time playing videogames become so easily disrupted by areas of everyday life that have nothing to do with it? Why am I and people I know treating play as a form of exchange rather than an activity in and of itself? More specifically, why does play not feel like *play* at times? Why does play feel corrupted by forces that do not (and should not) have nothing to do with it?. What should play be ideally? Does the dominant form of subjectivity affect how we play? How does it affect us as individuals? Play no longer feels bound to leisure and, as I argue, this is because neoliberalism and its effects have corrupted play.

⁶I realise that the videogames I have used as examples are often competitive multi-player games but the same can be said of videogame series like *Dark Souls*, *Fallout*, and *Assassin's Creed* that are focussed upon in this book.

There is ample work that exists around the complicating nature of videogames and why and how they are played. For example, the notion of ‘playbour’ has been introduced to highlight the blurred distinctions between work and play. Goggin (2011) has argued that play and labour

to the extent that they were formerly thought to be stable, discrete categories have, in numerous contexts from office management to online game worlds, somehow changed places or come together to form striking hybrids. (p. 357)

Sotamaa (2010), on the other hand, identified how player agency was being changed even a decade ago by new possibilities presented by modern videogame consoles, as players were able to become more than just a player of the videogame and become a producer of content in their own right. These arguments on the changing nature of players’ relationship with play in videogames is the sort of scholarship I seek to build upon to demonstrate how neoliberalism affects everyday life, especially as this work is not occupied directly with the effects of neoliberalism in gaming. Play in videogames is just one area in which neoliberal ways of being bleed into every area of thought and action.

Furthermore, more recent work has been instrumental in identifying ways in which modern social and economic life (including neoliberalism) interact with the play of videogames. Ruffino (2018) outlines the approach of creative games studies, an approach designed to question and problematise many of the assumed notions of what games are for and how games studies can be a valuable field of inquiry. This is an incredibly useful concept. More playful methods, such as Ruffino’s creative games studies, are well equipped to carry this out as they allow for ample theorisation on the play within videogames. Muriel and Crawford (2018) consider the importance of videogames in relation to notions of identity and the centrality this has to modern notions of agency. Bailes (2018) studies how the antagonisms of modern social life within neoliberal structures also make themselves present in virtual videogame environments. Woodcock (2019) offers a Marxist analysis of play and the games industry, studying the role of videogames in the functioning of contemporary capitalism.

All this work has gone a long way to explore some of the ways in which play operates within capitalist and more recently neoliberal structures. This book will add to this strand of research by examining in detail the ways in which neoliberalism corrupts play, focussing primarily on the structures and consumption of the AAA videogame medium. Using cognitive mapping to map the ideological terrain of the AAA videogame it will be revealed that neoliberal ideology is present within the very structure of the videogame. The terrain that will be mapped are features present within, such as the way information is presented, gameplay mechanics, or how elements of the videogame are purchased. Effectively, the book aims to demonstrate how to traverse the ideological space the player must move through whilst engaging with a AAA videogame. This is a novel method through which to approach the videogame medium but using it can reveal how

deeply embedded neoliberal ideology is within the AAA medium. It is my aim that the cognitive mapping method can build upon other contemporary research and offer a way of studying videogames that can reveal ideological significance within different elements of the medium.

The State of Play

Videogames and neoliberalism have in many ways developed alongside each other. Videogames played on home consoles emerged in the 1970s with the *Magnavox Odyssey* and later the *Atari 2600*. The *Atari 2600* is especially important as it brought arcade classics like *Pong* (1977),⁷ *Space Invaders* (1978), and *Pac-Man* (1982) into the home. The Atari console has been credited with having defined the way we play videogames, ‘pulling kids from the arcade to the basement’ (Edgers, 2009). This was the beginning of a cultural shift, altering the leisure activities of millions for decades to come. Different manufacturers have produced and distributed different consoles over an extended period of time now, the constant being people playing videogames in their own home or private settings. At the time of writing, we are currently in the ninth generation⁸ of videogame consoles that is dominated by the *PlayStation 5* and *Xbox Series X* (released in 2020), and *Nintendo Switch* that was released in 2017.⁹ As stated, there is a long history of home videogame consoles that dates to the 1970s but the work in this book will primarily be concerned with the AAA videogames played on the seventh and eighth generation of videogame consoles (the seventh generation included the *PlayStation 3*, *Xbox 360*, and *Nintendo Wii* and the eight included the *PlayStation 4* and *Xbox One*). The reason for this focus is the networked nature of these consoles and their relevance to the current dominant form of subjectivity within neoliberalism (and I don’t have a *PlayStation 5*). Whilst online play¹⁰ did exist prior to these consoles, the ubiquitous nature of downloadable content,¹¹ microtransactions,¹²

⁷*Pong* was contained in the videogame *Video Olympics* (1977), a collection of videogames that was released at the launch of the *Atari 2600*.

⁸The history of videogame consoles is usually referred to in the form of generations. A generation of consoles are the mass-market consoles released over a specific period. For example, consoles released between 1988 and 1990 would be the fourth generation.

⁹The *Nintendo Switch* inclusion here is a nod to Nintendo’s importance to videogame development as the *Nintendo Switch* is a home/portable hybrid console. This means it is different to the *PlayStation 5* and *Xbox Series X*. Technologically, the *Nintendo Switch* is closer to the eighth generation consoles, but I believe it merits inclusion.

¹⁰A means of playing a videogame that is either partially or primarily played via the internet or computer network.

¹¹Additional content for an already released videogame that is often purchased by the player.

¹²The purchasing of virtual goods in a gaming context. As with downloadable content, these purchases are made in a videogame which is already owned by the player.

and always online¹³ components in gaming has been particularly apparent during the life cycle of the seventh and eighth generation consoles. These components, as will be discussed throughout this book, anchor the AAA videogame within wider ideological frameworks, altering what is present in the play-space.

As well as the development of personal videogame consoles, it was during the 1970s that neoliberal hegemony began to take root in various places around the world.

Harvey (2005) identifies neoliberalism as:

[...] a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (p. 2)

Harvey (2005) states that from the 1970s there was a turn towards neoliberal political and economic policies ('deregulation, privatisation, and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision') which has seen neoliberalism become hegemonic and the 'common-sense' way in which we understand the world (p. 3).¹⁴ Becoming common-sense is ultimately the goal of all ideologies that seek to appear as a natural order of things, as neoliberalism does. Neoliberalism as an ideology seeks to make economic understanding of thought and action the common-sense understanding of thought and action, regardless of it being an economic activity or not. For instance, writing about a similar effect in a vastly different context, Foucault (2008) noted how the mother-child relationship has been distilled into an investment of time that produces the output of human capital in the form of the child's eventual ability to produce value (pp. 243–244). Action as exchange becomes the norm, there is a tendency to think of everything as input and output.

Harvey (2005) makes a significant observation in relation to the neoliberalisation of society, stating that the neoliberal interest in information technologies has 'compressed the rising density of market transactions in both space and time. [These technologies] have produced a particularly intensive burst of what I have elsewhere called "timespace compression"' (p. 4). Time-space compression refers to a change in relationship between space and time. It is rooted in the idea of the annihilation of space and time that occurs due to various technological developments. For example, telecommunications in many regard eliminated barriers of time and distance with their development. It eliminated the time and space that existed prior to its use. Time-space compression is a

¹³The videogame must always be connected to a server to be played even if the player is not playing against other human players of the videogame through online play. An example would be the discussed Ultimate Team mode in the *FIFA* videogames.

¹⁴More historical details of the development of neoliberalism will be discussed in Chapter 2: *Neoliberalism*.

facet of everyday life today. In relation to neoliberalism this amounts to the market forces becoming present in more elements of everyday life, institutions outside of the market becoming marketised and governed by market logics. The market brings everything towards it in terms of functioning and understanding. Harvey relates the consequences of this to the work done by Lyotard, in which Lyotard (1984) states that the fragmentation of social relations brought about by a market ethic governing relations result in consequences in ‘emotional, sexual, cultural, family, and international domains, as well as in political affairs’ (p. 66). As with Lyotard, Harvey (2005) notes that the cultural consequences of the domination of a market ethic are multifarious and ubiquitous (p. 4). The prolonged process of neoliberalisation has made its presence felt across multiple areas of life and continues to do so. How leisure is understood and undertaken has not gone untouched by this process. We are in an era in which the market ethic feels more dominant than ever, especially with regard to the gig economy (Scholz, 2017), platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017), and other manifestations of neoliberal ideology. Increasingly, people understand their lives, actions, and thoughts in economic terms. It is my argument that the insidious influence of neoliberal ideology has corrupted play. As how telecommunications eliminated space, neoliberal ways of being seeks to eliminate time and space that is not economically essential or useful.

Greene and Joseph (2015) have been particularly attentive to questions of technologies of time–space compression and the extent to which they help ‘re-scale capital accumulation in conjunction with new political forms’ (p. 235). In relation to videogames they observe how the digital space itself can become a ‘land’ in which companies (and sometimes other players) can demand rent from the player (Greene and Joseph, 2015, p. 237), specifically noting the capturing of value of videogame companies from networks of players (Greene and Joseph, 2015, p. 239). Although their observation is largely industry focussed, one can adapt it to examine question relating to play, especially ones relating to the re-scaling and re-purposing of digital space as enabled by contemporary modes of playing AAA games. Such an approach would enable critics to observe that the players themselves seek to capture similar value from digital spaces of play as companies do or eliminate *useless* space and time entirely. The operation of time–space compression is one of the ways in which play can become corrupted, as the operation of the play-space as a space for play can be altered to serve different operations (e.g. accumulation of financial capital or a capital of the self). This is a notion that is at the heart of my argument, play that is just play with no discernible output or purpose is not compatible with neoliberal ideology. Neoliberal ways of being will seek to rationalise or eliminate such an activity.

Neoliberalism is itself a slippery concept and there exists multiple forms of neoliberalisms with Peck (2013) describing it as a ‘rascal concept’, inferring it has a difficult and elusive nature (p. 133). For example, neoliberalism can look and operate different in separate geographical locations, especially if those locations are in the Global South and the West respectively. For instance, the neoliberal