
The Discourse of Digital Dispossession: Paid Modifications and Community Crisis on Steam

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Abstract

This article is a chronicle and analysis of a community crisis in digital space that took place on Valve Corporation's digital distribution platform, Steam. When Valve and Bethesda (publisher and developer of *Skyrim*) decided to allow mods to be sold by mod makers themselves, there ensued a community revolt against the commodification of leisure and play. I put this crisis of play and work in dialogue with Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession," firmly placing it within a longer history of disruptive capital accumulation strategies. I then conduct a discourse analysis of community members on reddit, as they make sense of and come to terms with this process of dispossession. Arising in the discourse was not class consciousness per se, but instead a pervasive feeling of helplessness and frustration as games, play, and leisure began to feel like work.

Keywords

digital labor, play, Steam, platform studies, digital distribution, game studies, discourse analysis

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On April 23, 2015, the digital game developer and production company, Valve Corporation, announced through their digital distribution platform Steam the introduction of buying and selling of “mods, maps, and all kinds of items that you’ve created.” They continued, saying that “with a new, streamlined process for listing and selling your creations, the Steam Workshop now supports buying mods directly from the Workshop, to be immediately usable in game” (Valve Corporation, 2015). Valve would launch this initiative through a partnership with Bethesda using *Skyrim* (2011), an open-world, single-player role-playing game as the pilot project. Four years after its release, *Skyrim* was still a popular game, with a thriving community of modders. It, and other games developed and published by Bethesda Game Studios, is a good example of the kind of digital games that support such communities. Bethesda often releases software packages (called software development kits [SDKs]) allowing users to create content for their games such as outfits, weapons, new enemies, quest lines, user interface upgrades, customizations, maps, and territories: in other words, mods. In practice, this means that new content is developed for these games for many years, even after the publisher has moved on from supporting it directly with updates and paid content expansions. Maybe most importantly, despite the fact that mods up to this point never made money directly for the modders or the game developers and publishers, they were intensely valuable as promotional objects (Postigo, 2007).

Four years after its publication, Valve and Bethesda had decided to capitalize on the existence of this long-term, highly committed community dedicated to *Skyrim*: “With the launch of paid mods in *Skyrim*, you can now support mod authors that are creating top quality items and amazing new experiences for your game” (Valve Corporation, 2015). All mods were suddenly, and immediately, eligible to be sold by their authors (and as I will discuss later, others as well). Modders received 25% of the final sale, Valve 30%, and Bethesda 45% (Wawro, 2015).

Several days after the announcement, the cheery tone with which the paid mods program was introduced was overshadowed by backlash from various quarters of the Internet. Both official and fan-based forums had been flooded with complaints. To manage some of the fallout, cofounder and CEO of Valve, Gabe Newell, had created a thread on reddit, asking the community what went wrong. By April 27, only 4 days after the program’s launch, Valve announced the immediate end (for the time being) of paid mods, promising refunds for any purchases made so far. They continued:

We’ve done this because it’s clear we didn’t understand exactly what we were doing. We’ve been shipping many features over the years aimed at allowing community creators to receive a share of the rewards, and in the past, they’ve been received well. It’s obvious now that this case is different. (Kroll, 2015)

Apparently, Valve had moved too fast, and angered a lot of people in the process, which begs the question, why? This article argues that what took place was a brief

moment of “dispossession,” something that digital and ludic economists should be studying in more detail.

This article is positioned as a case study that stresses the political economic origins of conflicts inside both the game and cultural industries. Some have suggested that the coming century will be defined by games, with games playing a larger role in society and business. As Zimmerman and Chaplin (2013) wrote, “As more people play more deeply in the Ludic Century, the lines will become increasingly blurred between game players and game designers.” My argument, contra this, is that it’s more likely that the 21st century will be defined by the increasingly acute sense of loss when it comes to games. They will indeed be everywhere, and more people will be encouraged to use systems thinking and design in their work. But the habits and spaces that once marked them as distinct activities from our work lives will quickly disappear if the trends outlined in this article continue. The “discourse of digital dispossession” will be omnipresent as social life and hobbies are fully commodified. Much as the peasants of the old world were “freed” from their bonds to the land, and forced to move to the cities to give rise to the working proletariat, so too people will be freed from the “choice” of playing games. Instead, work will be as much a game as anything else, and thinking like a designer a sad necessity, rather than a playful pursuit.

Historical Materialism, Case Studies, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Central to this particular process of dispossession is the platform Steam itself. Steam, which provides a wide variety of services (including a mod database, cloud-based game library, in-game marketplaces for goods, community pages, instant messaging and Voice over IP, and more), makes the process possible. This article is also a practical example responding to many of the theories proffered over the last five decades to describe media production, the qualitative changes in the organization of work. This literature in the political economy of communication has relied on theories that purported to “update” classical Marxist political economy such as Bell’s (1965, 1976) theories of postideological, postindustrial societies; Castells’s (2009) network society; and others. These theories have, in many ways, offered interesting insights but have also suggested that there has been a qualitative change in the mode of production. This article contributes to a growing body of literature that suggests that capitalism works in the same general dynamic as was theorized in the 19th century by Karl Marx, even if the technologies and techniques have changed over time (Caffentzis, 2013; Dibbell, 2009; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Harvey, 2006; Mosco, 2009; Moulrier-Boutang, 2012; Nixon, 2014; Rigi, 2014; Ross, 2010; Terranova, 2003). As Greene and Joseph (2015) argue, Marxist political economy has the tools and analytical capacity to explain and understand current dynamics of the digital world that competing theories (which decenter the labor process) cannot. To do this, I begin with a description of Marx’s concept of the “commodity fetish” and Harvey’s complementary concept of “accumulation by

dispossession” to highlight their relevance for this case. Then, I conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of a thread on reddit created by Gabe Newell (the CEO of Valve) wherein the paid mods update was discussed. Using CDA, I coded for a variety of themes, which I argue articulate two distinct discourses: the discourse of the consumer and the discourse of the community.

The Commodity Fetish

At the heart of the community crisis of *Skyrim* mod makers was the contradiction between the community’s love of making something fun or useful and the economic value that arises around the creation of these mods. It’s always been difficult to square some hobbies as they transition from amateur to professional, and the reason is because of the inherent tension that exists inside objects as they transform into commodities—this is the contradiction of the commodity fetish. Marx (1990) argued that while commodities, on the surface, appear to be designed and sold according to their use value, it is in fact their *exchange value* that determines their worth. But if usefulness, whatever its qualities, isn’t what imparts exchange value, what is? Marx’s insight is that labor is the determining factor of every commodity’s price. Each commodity could be very useful, or barely useful, but what really matters, when it comes time to sell it, was the quantity of labor put into its production.¹ It is by comparing all sorts of commodities in a general, abstract way, that sellers can begin to measure and understand how their commodities will sell on the marketplace.

For the mod makers who suddenly realized they were going to be making *commodities*, this meant that what was once somewhat within their control, was now subject to the forces of markets. Losing this small level of autonomy results largely because the dual character of the commodity demonstrates how the liberal conception of freedom is flawed from the outset. Harvey (2010) explains that:

The freedom of the market is not freedom at all. It is a fetishistic illusion. Under capitalism, individuals surrender to the discipline of abstract forces (such as the hidden hand of the market made much of by Adam Smith) that effectively govern their relations and choices. I can make something beautiful and take it to market, but if I don’t manage to exchange it then it has no value. Furthermore, I won’t have enough money to buy commodities to live. (p. 42)

No matter what one does, under the reign of capitalism, the lives of people (even those of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie) are organized around the production of commodities and exchange values instead of use values, leading to all kinds of frustration and anger, and as it happens 400 years of class struggle. Mod makers on Steam experienced this much as any other person does.

Accumulation by Dispossession

The dual character of the commodity is the medium upon which capitalism functions as it does, with its class struggles, ruthless competition, and vast accumulation. It's the motor of capital. But this is only a driving logic, which will always function in peculiar and unique ways when placed in concrete, historical conditions. In other words, what are the conditions capitalist accumulation is taking place in, and what particular aspect of accumulation is currently being undergone? My argument regarding *Skyrim* modders is that it is an example of what Harvey (2004) calls accumulation by dispossession. This concept updates Marx's original discussion of "primitive accumulation" in *Capital*, vol. 1, which describes how in the early 17th century, the English aristocracy, in conjunction with the newly powerful bourgeoisie, embarked on a campaign of enclosures, primarily with the goal of dispossessing the commons from the existing peasantry. In the process, they would turn this land, once farmed under feudal property arrangements with set amounts taxed by the local lords, into pastures for sheep and the production of wool (Marx, 1990; Polanyi, 2001).

Harvey (2004) argues that while imperialism (described by Lenin [2005] as the "highest stage of capitalism," where capitalist nations vie for ongoing control of the resources of less powerful nations via military and economic domination) is still a constant feature of contemporary capitalism, dispossession continues in earnest as capital searches for new ways to both avoid crisis and find new spaces of accumulation. Harvey (2004) calls this process accumulation by dispossession.

Building on this work, Greene and Joseph (2015) wrote at length about what we call a "digital spatial fix" for capital, that is, capital's ability to spatially and temporally avoid crisis by moving into digital space and time. What I argue here is that the debate about paid mods on Steam exemplifies accumulation by digital dispossession. Steam created a digital space where new forms of creativity and wealth could be produced. As both Postigo (2003) and Kücklich (2005) demonstrate, the use values created in these spaces were already partially commodified as unpaid, unforced forms of labor. This labor still produces concrete exchange values for capitalists while providing use values for players. Modding was even profitable for some modders, as they often had Patreon and PayPal donation pages set up on their profile pages on NexusMods, a popular mod database. Both Patreon and PayPal offer modders legal ways of asking for money to help them develop their mods. Instead of charging for the mod itself, they often ask that fans of their mod "tip" them for their ongoing contribution to the overall community. This frames how service work produces nebulous, but still very real effective commodities that aren't necessarily reducible to any one "mod," but instead the *production of community*. The controversy ensued when these modders were momentarily "dispossessed" of this labor by the paid mods program. Social production that had previously existed through custom and community became subject to the same dictates and laws of the marketplace. It turned labor that was previously performed as a hobby into

something shaped by the marketplace. That this process was not mandatory, but optional, is key to the power of commodification: It appears first as a choice—a kind of freedom—while in actuality, it is anything but.

The Rise of Digital Distribution, Game Modifications, and Steam

The relations of production in which the commodification of mods on Steam arose are caught up in a variety of forces and economic trends. In this section, I discuss the creation of modification as a hobbyist activity, the rise of what Neiborg (2015) calls the “many-to-few” digital distribution business model, and the specific history of Steam as a platform to provide the political economic context in which digital dispossession occurs.

Mods are user-created, customized content for a digital game. While homebrew cartridges and other hacks have likely existed as long as digital games themselves, the discourse of “modding” as distinct practice starts begins to gain traction around the mod “Castle Smurfenstein,” a modification for the game *Castle Wolfenstein* (1981). One of the most popular games to mod was *Doom* (1993) (and with the release of *Doom*’s source code, in 1997), which allowed players to create their own levels and have others download their mods over the Internet (Kücklich, 2005). id Software, realizing an opportunity was at hand in the guise of a hobby, began to support modding explicitly when they released *Doom*’s source code and began to release level editors with their follow-up games, *Quake* (1996) and *Quake II* (1997) (Kücklich, 2005). After this, modding became more commonplace.

Some of the most successful mods, however, were associated with Valve’s *Half-Life* (1998). One of the first was *Team Fortress* (1996), which was originally a mod for id Software’s *Quake*. The team that made *Team Fortress* was hired by Valve, the intellectual property bought up to develop *Team Fortress Classic* as a *Half-Life* mod. In 1999, Mihn Li and Jess Cliff released *Counter-Strike*, a modification for *Half-Life*. The game, one of the first competitive tactical first-person shooters (now a commonplace genre), was a breakout hit for Li and Cliff and resulted in their getting hired by Valve after they sold *Counter-Strike*’s intellectual property rights to Valve (Kücklich, 2005; Vargas, 2005). This is in fact a common strategy for Valve, who have also hired the developers of games like *Narbacular Drop* (2005), and mods like *Defence of the Ancients* (2003; a popular *Warcraft III* [2002] mod). Valve has built a sizable share of their business on the backs of hobbyist and semiprofessional mod production. Since then, modding has had a significant role in how people consume, and by extension, how games are created (Kücklich, 2005; Nieborg & van der Graaf, 2008; Postigo, 2003). There’s also a significant portion of hiring inside the game industry that is directly tied to mod-making, as mods are considered important pieces of a portfolio for aspiring game designers (Deuze, Martin, & Allen, 2007).

The most important aspect of modding for this analysis is that when a developer releases an SDK for people to use to develop mods, they include an end-user license agreement (EULA). This EULA, almost without exception, has included a clause

that forbids the modder from profiting by selling the mod (Kücklich, 2005). Not being allowed to charge for mods means that modders were unable to build a career from modding practices exclusively. While many could use mods within a portfolio of prior work when job seeking, or as a mode of skill development, modders in the 1990s through the 2000s were not making money from this hobby (Nieborg & van der Graaf, 2008). If a modder wanted to make money by developing a mod, they had to enter into a formal business relationship with the owner of the proprietary game engine. Many game engines have been licensed to a variety of game studios over the years, the most popular of which was the Quake engine, developed by id Software. Yet the rates for licensing this engine were steep, and hobbyists were unlikely to ever have the means to enter into this kind of relationship. Modding, as a practice that “anybody” with access to the SDK and a PC could do, remained “uncommodified,” in a formal sense.

This relationship would change with the rise of the very distribution platforms that were created to enable modding: online app stores and platforms like Steam. Nieborg’s (2015) work on the rise of “freemium” games, primarily sold through distribution platforms such as the iTunes store, is an important account of the transition to software marketplaces dominated by the hegemony of digital distribution platforms. He elaborates that a “handful of superstars camouflage the inherent power asymmetries and the strong winner-take-all dynamic constituting the political economy of the information economy” (p. 228). In other words, the shift to online consumption has not shifted the power dynamic toward small creators or consumers. The biggest change that Nieborg notes with the rise of digital distribution is the change among producers (developers), publishers, and distributors. It has been rearranged in favor of new organizations, who hold a privileged position in the chain of production: platform owners.

This power dynamic results from the relationship between developers and the owners of the platforms, to whom they are beholden both economically and technologically. The market commanded by these online stores means that any developers who eschew them would suffer not only from the lack of availability on their respective platforms, but from decreased visibility and discoverability as well. Thus, while there are more people than ever creating digital games and apps, they still must go through these few stores, which hold a formal monopoly on their platforms. In other words, this ludic economy is currently constituted of many (developers) to few (platforms/stores) (Nieborg, 2015). I would argue that this applies, in a similar way, to the PC market where Steam holds its monopoly. The barrier to entry is lower for game developers than it has ever been. But the many-to-few business model relies on a series of protected, privately owned, and operated distribution networks that serve to either bury or, if one has enough capital, prominently display, digital games. All of this is an excellent example of what Gillespie (2010) calls the “edges” of the politics of platforms. The term “platform” itself does a considerable amount of discursive work for those who run and own them. In the discourses that arise when framing their own platforms, corporations like Valve will emphasize the

“democratic” and value-creating benefits of these environments and technologies but will always downplay the network effects they have a unique and powerful control over. In this way, platforms position themselves as neutral while in practice belie the democratizing discourse they use and benefit from.

The History of Steam

While Valve now enjoys its monopoly with Steam, it wasn't always this way. Steam began as an experiment of sorts, and its future power was anything but certain. Following its announcement at the Game Developers Conference in 2002, Steam was first introduced as a way to quickly deliver game updates to players of Valve's various online games. Through this, Valve could better maintain their online gaming products. A big challenge for many players of these games was making sure one had the most recent patch (update) of the game that matched the host server's version of the game. If a player didn't have the right patch, they would be either unable to connect to the server or the game would crash. Delivering patches directly to players as soon as they connected to the Internet solved this problem.

In 2004, Valve announced that all future games would require Steam in order to run. This meant that users would be able to pay for and download their games entirely through the Steam Store, but it also meant that if you bought a boxed copy of, for instance, Valve's *Half-Life 2* (2004), you would have to install Steam, update to the most recent version, and check the authenticity of the installation (ensuring that the copy was not pirated). Here, the unique affordances of digital distribution were used to rectify the format's vulnerability to piracy, by creating a rigorous (if imperfect) system of digital rights management (DRM).

By 2005, Steam signed its first third-party distribution agreements, turning it from a proprietary platform just for Valve into a service for other game developers. From this point on, Steam's game library began to grow significantly. Since the shift toward selling third-party games, Steam has developed as a platform—it underwent a significant redesign in 2010, foregrounding it more as a store than as a digital game library. It launched the Steam Workshop (a space for modders to upload their mods), Community tab (a space for forums and group management), and Community Marketplace (where in-game commodities could be traded and sold for money). It introduced (the now defunct) Steam Greenlight, a crowdsourced service to which small, independent game designers could submit their games in the eventual hope of getting approval by the community to officially sell the game on Steam. As this demonstrates, Steam as a store and as a platform is now considerably more developed, with the accompanying power and authority that comes with it.

Multistakeholder Discourse on Steam

The discourses that arise to describe, justify, and contest the existence and power of these platforms are heavily influenced by the complex economic ecosystem within

which they exist. In this section, I discuss two major discourses—the discourse of the community and the discourse of the consumer—that reveal the different ways in which different structural positions influence how Steam is understood by various stakeholders: users, modders, and the CEO of Valve, Gabe Newell.

Following several days of social media and forum pushback against the changes to Steam’s mod database, Gabe Newell created the thread on Saturday, April 25, 2015 (2 days after the launch of the paid mods program), beginning with a short post “to make sure that if people are pissed off, they are pissed off for the right reasons.” This post was immediately downvoted on reddit, rendering it very difficult to find. Over 18,000 comments were posted in reply. Here, on one of the Internet’s most highly trafficked sites, the millionaire CEO of a beloved video-game company was regularly called greedy and stupid. As one commenter noted, in response to Gabe Newell’s suggesting that the money they have spent on damage control in answering e-mails numbers into the millions of dollars, one commenter said, “Come back in 6 months to a year and say that you’re losing this much money . . . Sorry but you guys are being super greedy and it’s extremely obvious.”

This was the thread that I coded, as I was particularly interested in analyzing the discourse that navigated the line between the pure mechanics of the forum and the actual conversation that community members were attempting to have with Newell. I focused on analyzing 250 distinct comments in this thread. These comments were the top 250 ranked comments in direct reply to Gabe Newell’s comments. This indicates a salient methodological point related to using a forum like reddit as a data collection point. On reddit, the visibility of comments is correlated to the mechanic of “upvotes” and “downvotes,” which create a rating that influences how visible each post is.

Through an iterative process, I narrowed the focus to four core themes: commodification, community, property, and greed. These four did not only appear regularly as themes but also overlapped. Out of these, I constructed two major patterns of discourse. The “discourse of the consumer” and the “discourse of the community.” Both of these distinct discourses have overlapping concerns, but both articulate a distinct position related to the paid mods debate.

The discourse of the consumer speaks to, and about, the subject position of being a consumer of modifications. It is mobilized not only by consumers but also by those who describe themselves as mod developers when talking about their audience. It foregrounds the possibility of the Steam marketplace being flooded with indistinguishable, voluminous mods of dubious value. It is interested in the “openness” of the mod community as a source of value for good mods, and it assumes a baseline of freedom to consume, at-will, with full control over any mod at any time free of charge.

In the discourse of the community, the idea of the community is mobilized rhetorically as a kind of “royal we.” The community is described in various ways, but most often as holistic, genuine, open, and willing to work collectively through problems. Because of the paid mods program, the community is regularly

described as under threat. My argument is that the contradictions on display in both of these discourses arise due to similar structural circumstances that inform similar debates about indie versus mainstream game development and radical versus liberal conceptions of institutional change (Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Harvey, 2014; Parker, 2014).

The Major Themes

Commodification

The first major theme that was present throughout the forum post was the discussion that orbited the act of commodifying mods. In this discussion is where the first inklings of the two distinct discourses arose, expressing concerns about disruption to the community or disruption to the consumer. Quite early on it was clear that the one of the biggest problems with commodification was piracy and market saturation. For example, one poster said:

You have created a system wherein one might potentially gain significant money for little invested effort (i.e., copy a legit mod that say, hasn't been looked at in a long time by it's creator, change the name, sell it via steam for a profit and cash out daily until you get caught and your created-for-this account banned).

Another prominent post described this in terms of “moral hazard”:

Modders often make unofficial patches. If mod devs put their unofficial patches behind a paywall, it incentivizes game devs to never completely fix their game or to intentionally break it so they can get a cut from the sales of these patches, creating a hidden cost for the game not listed in its retail price. This logic extends to a lesser extent to making poor game mechanic and balance design decisions, making sub-par graphics, and creating inconveniences for the player.

Thus, from the perspective of selling mods, these commenters felt that commodifying the mods in this way would become a burden, rather than a boon for those trying to sell them in the first place. Swindlers, and lazy mod makers, would always have the upper hand and would abuse the system. Other commenters pointed out that commodification would poorly impact consumers that “one of the mose core mods, skyui, is behind a paywall.”²

Another described paid mods as a paywall: “Listen to your customers. Please. We don't mind supporting modders. But we don't want a paywall. Nobody wants a paywall.” The consumer-side argument against commodification is often framed in these terms: that they don't want to pay for each mod. Instead community members would rather donate via PayPal or Patreon. Another commenter said that they know people “volunteering on large team projects that are suddenly turning on everyone and retracting their work because they can make a buck.”

Commodification is at the root of two distinct ways of talking about the commodification of mods as distinct products. When a useful good provided for free suddenly costs money, those involved, on both sides of the equation, feel that their lives will be impacted in serious ways. There's also a strong current of framing this debate in terms of "meritocracy." There is a strong sense in communities of play and leisure that practice and skill are the most important values to be pursued and that the rewards one receives from such skills are accolades and the good feelings of a job well done.³ Comments concerned about the results of mod commodification reflect the fact that some in the community denigrate those mod makers who pursue their craft in search of profits. Instead, it is implied that mod makers have a duty to their fans and the community to make good mods that people want, as much as Valve has a duty to provide them the platform to do that. If these mod makers start looking for a cheap dollar, these commenters assume that the magic of meritocracy is lost. That this is ideologically contradictory with wider societal discourses about competition and capitalism, that is, that only the best products and services will be rendered by individuals motivated by monetary means, again illustrates how the social relations produced by commodities are antagonistic. In this way, consumers and the community are united discursively by a common antagonism to commodification.

Community

Community was easily the most recurrent theme discussed during the paid mods debate, where it seemed that the biggest anxiety for many was that not only would they lose free mods but the community of those who play, made, and talked about mods as well.⁴ For example, for a number of commenters, modding was why they wanted to play games on the PC in the first place, in part because it meant they had more control over the play experience as well as the community experience. Here, one commenter directly blames the monetization of mods for this:

... by adding money to the equation you are fracturing the community that had grown up around [*The Elder Scrolls*] modding. I feel this may do serious damage to the entire modding community, and IMHO its a really bad move in total for PC gaming; since a real big draw to PC gaming is Modding.

This is only one of many examples of mobilizing the idea of community to make a case against Steam and Bethesda's paid mods program.

An important interaction in the forum thread occurred between Newell and Robin Scott, the founder and operator of NexusMods. Scott has earlier expressed his concern about Steam implementing, in league with Bethesda, a "DRMification" of modifications, functionally turning mods for *Skyrim* into a proprietary feature of Steam. In his critique, he elaborates a doomsday scenario for his website and modding community: Mods that would be *unable* to be downloaded and played

through any platform other than Steam. After Newell says that it is their role as a platform owner to dictate such terms to a publisher, Scott responds:

We're not talking about limiting types of content, we're talking about the functionality of Steam being used to fundamentally change a principle tenet of the modding community that's existed since the very beginning. That is, the principle that the sharing of mods can be free and open to everyone, if they so wish, and that that choice remains squarely in the hands of the people who develop those mods.

Scott is specifically getting at the tension between the community and the platform itself. There's a serious perceived threat to what makes the community distinct and important to those in it. Here, a "free and open" community, materially embodied in the forums and websites they discuss and collaborate in, is finding itself subjected to processes that are outside their control. The fear that Steam and Bethesda might unilaterally decide to make *Skyrim* mods exclusive to Steam shows how a community hub like Nexusmods is subject to the dictates of a platform. At threat is the moderate level of independence of mod makers from both Bethesda and Steam enjoyed by the community. This is just one short example of how "community" is mobilized discursively in defense of dispossession.

Property

Property was mostly an implicit theme. I coded for it whenever I saw a comment that implied that the introduction of paid mods would create a problem because of intellectual property rights being enforced in new and confusing ways. For example, here a modder worries about what would happen to first-time modders when they discovered that building a new mod based on the code from another mod was no longer possible:

I haven't made a bunch of mods but the ones I have made were built on the shoulders of other modders. some of which actually came out and helped me figure out why some of my modified scripts weren't working. with the way the paywall is setup a beginner mod maker would be hard pressed to get that kind of help. because it might impact other mod maker's bottom line

Here, another commenter notes that mods had often been large collaborations coordinated through online forums, where tasks were divided up according to skill and interest. They were social endeavors:

Ice frog didn't make dota alone, there were people before and during his takeover that worked and helped, there were people posting concept art for heroes and items, new ideas for both heroes and items, people beta testing, giving feedback . . . , etc. and all was done on the dota forum, it was a huge forum . A few years later and Ice frog gets all the credit because he implemented and made choices on different aspects of the mod.

Dota 2 wouldn't have existed without the community especially not if every person would have taken his share of the "pie."

The commenter here is proposing that one of the most popular and important mods of the last 10 years was in fact a large collaborative project where the majority of credit wrongly went to one person: Ice frog.⁵ Ice frog went on to get hired by Valve because of his role on *DoTA* and, as such, unfairly benefited because of the existing property relations mods were created in. Property is thus seen as a problem that gets in the way of true expression and true community. If every big mod created is a project with a division of labor and thus, many people working on it, when property gets introduced into the picture, the rewards will get funneled to those who are able to take credit, even if they weren't necessarily the ones who could reasonably claim it.

This reflects the same concern I saw with the theme of "commodification": Meritocracy is put at risk by property relations rather than reinforced and encouraged by them. The paid mods debate certainly brought these issues into the foreground, but as evidenced by these stories, it's an ever-present tension within the community. There is a similar roadblock for the consumer: If the creators of mods are bickering with each other over who "owns" the mod, it's unlikely that the mods that they love (e.g., ones like *Defense of the Ancients*) will get made. Existing mods might disappear due to intellectual property disputes. Discursively, property appears as a roadblock instead of an enabler of a "free market."

Greed

When commenters talk about greed, they are talking about the greed of Valve and Bethesda, even if they are critical (as evidence above) of the purported success of modders like Ice frog. Here, one commenter talked about the paid mods program as greedy:

I also believe this to be a cash grab from you guys and Bethesda. You say it hasn't generated much but the fact that you're defending it makes me think it will and that's all you and valve care about anymore. The system that was in place worked for decades and then suddenly, without warning this is brought up.

A different commenter said that "this system is extremely profitable, which is the only reason you decided to implement it." Another put it more bluntly: "The goal is for you and Bethesda to make money. Just be honest." Regardless of what Newell, Valve, or Bethesda said, many commenters believed that the move was motivated by what they describe as an almost incomprehensible appetite for money.

Those who accuse Valve of greed fail to address how mods were *already* profitable for Valve and Bethesda. In a sense, these commenters see the 75% of each mod sale as an egregious moral failure to remunerate modders fairly, without seeing

the hidden relationship that was present all along with mod making: It was unwaged labor, all the profits of which were going to Valve and Bethesda. Because the relationship by which these corporations benefit from mods is opaque, it makes sense that a popular discourse of greed based on the blatant inequality in remuneration implemented by Valve would arise. In an interesting twist, the one-sided relationship in a fully exploitative system with no remuneration for labor seems less likely to resonate with a lot of people than one that is “less” exploitative in absolute terms but is now codified for all to see. By turning unforced, uncoerced, and unwaged labor into contract labor, the real relationship between labor and capital is unveiled as an antagonism.

Greed presents itself primarily as part of the discourse of the consumer because now consumers perceive that they will have to pay more. Presumably, this is because Valve wasn't happy with the profits they were already collecting from the games. The discourse of the community takes this a step further and argues that the community as getting destroyed in the process. Community members have to suddenly transform from hobbyists into entrepreneurs to, and for the privilege, pay high services fees to Valve and Bethesda. In both discourses, dispossession presents itself as a material, economic disruption and also a crisis of morality.

Conclusion

In this article, I have focused on two moments in the political economy of the paid mods dispute: the relations of production that Steam as a platform exists in and the discourses that play a role in the production and consumption of the *Skyrim* modding community. The discourse of the consumer and the discourse of the community are manifestations of the same contradiction between labor and capital, which in the words of Harvey (2010) is that “I can make something beautiful and take it to market, but if I don't manage to exchange it then it has no value” (p. 42). In other words, it is exchange values that override the “useful” qualities of things according to the logics of the marketplace rather than concrete human needs or desires. The pressure of the marketplace to reduce labor costs and while also producing profitable commodities weighs heavily on the words of those speaking up for the community and consumers. This social relation produces individuals who exist in antagonistic opposition to one another while at the same time pointing to the same problem (the commodification of mods) as their origin point. This, for me, shows how discourse produces, reproduces, and rearticulates material practices. In other words, discourse arises in the context of actually existing social relations, comes to understand and describe some facets of those relations, and then justifies or questions those relations.

In this case, the discourse of the consumer reproduces the ethics of the community but also its contradiction: the continued fully unwaged exploitation of modders' labor. The discourse of the consumer reproduces this absolute exploitation under the guise of consumer ease of access, which still helps Steam continue to be the prime

arbiter of accessing mods. These discourses show the consumer feeling frustrated by being forced to pay for mods that were once free, illuminating the monopoly that Steam holds in the digital games marketplace. They also show a community feeling subject to the whims of a company that wants to mobilize its users as a workforce, rather than an egalitarian collective of enthusiasts.

The disjuncture in these two discourses is where I see the location for the discursive collapse between work and play. Because the platform is instrumental to linking both work and play, changes to the platform like this make visible the material collapse into each other as well. Consumers talk about how they have no choice, no recourse, to what is going on. The community simultaneously realizes that the space they are allowed to operate in is private property. Both groups want Valve to exercise control, but what counts as the “right kind” of control is hardly agreed upon by both parties. For Gabe Newell (like other platform owners like, say, Mark Zuckerberg), control is about taking as little responsibility as possible. For the community, it is moderation, support, easy access to tools, and a mechanism that avoid direct, pure commodification of mods. The chasm between both groups is wide, and in the middle is Valve, which has its own corporate goals to navigate in a complex and ever evolving marketplace.

It is particularly interesting that after Newell’s creation of the reddit thread, the program was discontinued, pending further development and testing.⁶ It is uncertain if anything said in this specific forum thread led directly to this discontinuation. Instead of any one discourse having a direct causal effect, it was likely the intensity and frequency of feedback from various places, both on the official Steam forums, enthusiast websites, this reddit thread, and through e-mail that led to this decision. In the end, the paid mods program announcement and implementation brought to the forefront a series of social contradictions that had previously been latent in the practice of modding. These contradictions found expression in the discourses found on forums like reddit, which showed a community and consumer base that was ill at ease with the social dynamics of commodification.

All of this shows how Gillespie’s (2010) call for a critical analysis of platforms is ongoing and pressing within the study of ludic economies. Beyond just the concept of “platform” being both contested and highly politically charged, there are seriously frayed *edges* to them. When dispossession takes place, a crisis is bound to result, and the discourse back and forth between those who own platforms and those who labor and play on them show that there is an ongoing contestation of what these platforms are and will become. In the case of Steam and the paid mods dispute, this means the specter that haunts all discussions of ownership, platforms, work, and play is the dream of meaningful activity that is not tied to waged and unwaged labor. Making mods and playing with them might seem mere expressions of hobbies and play, but a hobby is only a hobby in the context of a social world with wage labor. It’s important that critical scholars continue to look at ludic economies and do their best to identify the contradictions that exist within them because it is only out of these contradictions that a new world, and a new kind of play, can become real.

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Notes

1. As Marx (1990) says, “a commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference” (p. 1).
2. Skyui is considered a core mod by the community because a number of other modifications often cannot run without first installing it.
3. This is not always the case, however, as Caillois (1958) was once careful to point out that games of chance and skill often have rewards (lotteries or poker tournaments, etc.). The belief in meritocracy in cultures of play inherently ignores the contradictions that arise from chance as determinants of victory and defeat.
4. It’s important to note that the theme of “community” is distinct from the “discourse of the community,” which I later constructed out of more than one theme. Here, I coded broadly for any appeal or discussion of community in its many forms.
5. *Defence of the Ancients* was originally a modification for Blizzard Entertainment’s *Warcraft III*. “Ice frog” was later hired by Valve to develop *DoTA 2*.
6. Most recently, Bethesda relaunched a less complicated version of paying modders for this work: The Bethesda’s Creation Club fully internalizes the process by which some (not all) new mods will be rolled out “officially” where the mod teams get paid for their work. This new formulation of this ongoing process is worth investigating, especially as it becomes normalized (Bethesda, 2017).

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