Labor Alienation and Subjectivity Reconstruction of Gamers from the Perspective of Fox's Digital Labor Theory

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Abstract. With the development of the digital economy, booming of the gaming industry, the line between work and leisure has been increasingly blurred. When playing games online, users' data, creativity and social relations are appropriated by game companies without remuneration or paid for pittance, a new type of "workers"- "gaming laborers" has been born. Based on Christian Fox's digital alienation matrix, this study takes "gaming laborers" in online games as the research subject. It explores their labor alienation from the perspective of economy, institution and culture, and discusses its feasible ways out to reconstruct their subjectivity. The research findings show that economic, institutional and cultural mechanisms cause the alienation of game workers. The triple alienation causes the crisis of subjectivity. Game workers gradually lose their free and conscious "species-being" in the midst of economic dependence, institutional constraints and cultural homogenization. In order to reconstruct their subjectivity, gaming laborers should build shared online platforms, transform data into public resources, resist consumerist logic and eventually let gaming laborers return to their original subject position as free creative agents.

Keywords: game workers, digital labor, Christian Fox, subjectivity.

1. Introduction

Cookridge proposed the term "playbour" in the process of researching the unpaid work of game modders, believing that the work of game modders will be stolen by game developers without any pay. Faced with the new type of labor which created in cybercity, scholars have initially established a theoretical framework to analyze the alienation and subjectivity reconstruction of playbour. Game players are changing from "alienated objects" to "critically conscious subjects". At present, the existing researches lack a systematic analysis of resistance strategies, therefore, it is also necessary to explore its underlying mechanisms and limitations. Taking "game playbours" as the research object, this study uses Fox's digital alienation matrix to analyze the labor alienation dilemmas that game playbours met with, and further explores the root causes of the subjectivity crisis of game playbours. Finally, this study attempts to explore a practical road toward subjectivity reconstruction. This not only extends and enriches digital labor theory and reveals the survival politics of game workers under the digital capitalism, but also provides new perspectives to explore labor politics under digital economy era, which have important academic values and practical significance.

2. Three Dimensions of Labor Alienation Among Game Workers

In "1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts", Marx put forward the theory of alienated labor and its fourfold determination. Labor is a free and conscious activity in essence. However, under capitalist private ownership, the recognized labor is alienated and becomes an alien and antagonistic force. "Alienation shows up, on the one hand, in that the means of livelihood of man are not his own and that what he wants is something he cannot get, something that belongs to somebody else; it shows up on the other hand, in that everything is something other than itself, that my activity is something other than itself, and finally, and this applies equally to the capitalist as well, in that an inhuman force masters everything." [1] In the context of capitalist network, Fox's "Digital Alienation Matrix" provides us with a new and overall perspective to examine the dilemma of game workers. It is shown

that the labor alienation which game workers face is not simple economic exploitation, but the result of interaction and mutual reinforcement of economic, institutional and cultural dimensions [2].

2.1. Economic Dimension: Surplus Value Exploitation and Self-Exploitation

On the economic level, the extraction of game workers' surplus value by the gaming platform manifests as a covert exploitation form of exploitation combined with overt exploitation and "overt self-exploitation." Game players produce data and content as they play games. Platforms appropriate this data and content for free. Online platforms use this data for targeted marketing and games to maximize profits. Thus, the data that game players invest considerable time into producing is very valuable data.

Through their algorithms and data collection, platforms appropriated the value of data produced by people and induced them to do this for free. As Marx wrote, the product of labor is "an alien entity, a force independent of the producer" [1].

Ideologically, platforms often refer to the labor extracted from game workers beyond their needs as "overt overtime." Games themselves have potent mechanisms for driving labor. Daily check-ins, weekly quests, season passes, achievements, leaderboards—all of this sets short- and long-term goals for players that force them to do overtime and willingly invest considerable time. As gamers do daily, they may feel that they are "self-actualizing." Gamers may fail to realize that the inducement to work overtime to do for the platform's own profit is to extract unpaid or low-paid labor.

2.2. Institutional Dimension: Institutional Discipline and the Erosion of Player Agency

Alienation in this dimension is players losing their subjectivity and their power in game platforms. This loss occurs through two forms of discipline: platform rule-making and technological discipline. Digital technology as a tool itself is amiable. However, under capitalist production relations, capital uses digital technology to tighten its control over labour. Accessing game platforms means that players have no choice but to submit to the unilateral rules set by network platforms such as the "User Agreement". These terms are one-sidedly written by platform operators. Players have no choice but to accept and click "Agree" to passively enter game platforms. This completely excludes players from exercising governance over game platforms. Gaming workers lose any agency in making the rules of games in which they have invested hours of labour. This leads to massive encroachment over the agency.

Having entered the game by unilaterally accepting the rules set by platforms, players still experience further control and discipline from game platforms. Gaming is free and non-utilitarian; there is no need for games to rely on external forces to control players but should instead allow for the realization of more pleasure and achievement. However, players are subject to mechanisms that games platforms have set up to influence players. Games platforms set up pathways for players' gaming experience through daily missions and achievement systems. Gaming subjects cannot exercise agency over their gameplay. They are suppressed from realizing humanity's essence in free, conscious activity as shown in the game process.

2.3. Cultural Dimension: The Alienation of Gaming Culture by Consumerism

Capitalist ideology has corrupted and distorted cultural life. Cultural alienation is evident in the thoughts, emotions and values of individual players being shaped by commercial logic. Ideologies of consumerism, the primacy of entertainment, etc., are the digital manifestations of this cultural alienation. Gaming culture should be rich and creative. However, under commercial pressures, it is gradually supplanted by pay-to-win competition and consumption for gratification.

As commercial logic seeps into gaming, the latent, diverse and creative cultural form of gaming is increasingly channelled and constrained into a single cultural form of consumption.

As the agents who produce culture through their digital labour, gamers fail to have this labour function as an engine for their development and progress; instead, it becomes an opposing force, a force that hinders their development.

To represent players' strength and status, game platforms steer players towards regarding equipment, skins, consumable items, etc., as virtual goods that stand in for players' abilities. This steering compels players away from discussing gameplay mechanics, story richness and aesthetic quality towards consuming in-game items. This is a kind of consumption that satisfies needs beyond players' own needs. Players consume social identity and status symbols to achieve an illusion of self-actualization through spending.

At the same time, this kind of consumption is presented as player support and passion for the game. Self-actualizing gameplay is hence transformed into an obsession with consumption.

Gameplay relationships between players are steered into competition and comparison.

3. The Root Causes and Paradox of Resistance in the Crisis of Agency Among Game Workers

The game workers' crisis of agency can be categorized into three levels: economic level, institutional level and cultural level. Game workers are economically dependent on the gaming platform. Game workers' labor and consumption in gaming platforms have to obey rigid rules; they don't have the material basis to negotiate with the gaming platform. Game workers' agency is bound by algorithms and the gaming platform's rules; their choices are confined within rules' framework. Their strategies, expression and even their emotion have been predicted and shaped by algorithms. At the cultural level, capitalism predicts and shapes game workers' agency by packaging labor into free and entertainment pleasure through the ideology of "play-labor", and a symbol marker used by online gaming platforms converts players' goals from realizing creative leisure into gaining numerical achievements and points for ranking.

In the face of a crisis of agency, game workers are not totally passive compromisers; their resistance modes are discussed and satirized in the media community, negative ratings on game review platforms or players initiated a boycott campaign. But their action just focuses on a certain incident, not reflecting on their basic situation of agency, so this can only provide temporary virtual compensation, which can't compensate for the platform's uncompensated appropriation of labor and invasion of gaming agency. In addition to this external mechanism, the internal mechanism also entraps the gaming laborer into a resistance paradox. At first, players enter into game, they expect to have freedom to create, relax, and achieve self-actualization. The game creates a virtual platform to meet players' expectations. Its power and pleasure, which it brought, are powerful enough to make people forget or tolerate exploitation hiding behind it. This is the internal contradiction that hinders gamer-worker subjectivity reconstruction.

4. Practical Pathways for Reconstructing the Subjectivity of Gameworkers

Fox's theory is not limited to criticism, but also provides possibilities for change. Fox believes that: defeating the alienation of digital labor lies in converting the logic of sharing on the Internet into a reality of social common ownership. He believes that only by changing the ownership of means of production and the form of labor organization can the logic of social common ownership be realized, and then digital labor can be converted into digital work, and labor power is no longer a commodity [2]. Facing the current digital capitalist situation, Fox hopes that digital workers can create a new "Occupy movement" and build new working-class platforms to occupy the public goods [3]. We can find possible ways to re-establish the subjectivity of gaming workers from these inspirations: The commodity characteristics of data generated by gaming workers while playing should be eliminated, and it should be considered as public goods or collectively owned and operated by players [4]. In addition, commercially operated gaming platforms should be transformed into shared platforms where players can really play—or even become the formulators of the game world rules, creators of game content, and managers of player communities. Gaming labor is not limited to making the authentic requests of the player community, but also the purpose of accumulating more capital [5],

and then the collective of gaming laborers can get their subject position back and be able to engage in free play, action and creation again [6].

5. Conclusion

This article uses Fox's theory of digital alienation as a conceptual tool to describe and explain the labor alienation dilemma and crisis of subjectivity for game workers in the era of digital capitalism. The research findings show that game workers' alienation is economic, institutional and cultural mechanisms' collective results. The triple alienation triggers a crisis of subjectivity in which game workers are losing their free and conscious "species-being" under economic dependence, institutions' restrictions and cultural homogenization. Meanwhile, the structural oppression constrains workers in a "paradox of resistance": their limited resistance is unable to break exploitations. Then, this paper proposes a path to reconstructing subjectivity based on the public ownership of the means of production and empowering players. It suggests building decommodified shared gaming platforms and player-led community governance models. The limitation of this study is that it did not use empirical data to quantify the level of alienation that Fox proposed. For example, in addition to textual analysis of players' communities, it used behavioral data analysis in games. Future research can offer more solid validation for Fox's three-dimensional alienation model.

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