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An Analysis of the Relevancy of the Communist Philosophy

Philosophies fade with time. Philosophies can become irrelevant as civilization changes over time. For a philosophy to remain relevant, we must see it apply to today's society and culture. Given that Communism collapsed and consumer culture drives the global economy, we must question how relevant the philosophy of Karl Marx remains. Modern culture has become a culture of consumerism, starting decades ago with the acquisition of physical possessions, now evolved to the acquisition of digital licenses for the right to access. The video game industry is the largest of all digital entertainment industries (Richter). This paper will examine three primary components of how today's video game industry operates: manufactured instant gratification, manipulation of the fear of missing out, and the machination of pulling ownership of video games away from consumers. This examination will show that Marx's dialectical materialism has yet to overcome modern consumer culture, as demonstrated by the video game industry's exploitation of its own workforce and consumers.

Before we examine Marx's relevance to the video game industry, we must review key components of Marx's background, philosophy, and the historical context in which Marxism was conceived. Born in 1818 to an upper-middle class German-Jewish family during the Industrial Revolution, Marx held an affinity for philosophy. By his mid-20s, Marx transformed into a radical left-wing socialist, and worked as a journalist for a trade union. After the trade union declared bankruptcy, Germany exiled Marx due to his political activism. He moved to several

countries, exiled from each due to his activism. In Marx's travels, he met Friedrich Engels, an extraordinarily wealthy man and benefactor of Marx. In the waning years of the Industrial Revolution, Marx was poised to reconceptualize the still-budding philosophy of Communism. (Izrailevsky).

In Marx's philosophical studies, there were three philosophers whose ideas were transformative for Marx: George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Comte de Saint-Simon. From Hegel's ideas, Marx concluded that reality is singular and uniform, governed by a dialectical, or step-by-step, process demonstrating that progress is the result of conflict. From Feuerbach's ideas, Marx concluded that reality is also material, and therefore material conditions of life control reality. From Saint-Simon, Marx concluded that conflict between an owning, governing, bourgeoisie class and a producing, exploited, proletariat class is the core conflict throughout history. These core philosophies formed Marx's basis for Communism, which is broadly referred to by many other names such as dialectical materialism or Marxism. For clarity and consistency, I will reference Marx's philosophy only as dialectical materialism or Marxism.

Dialectical materialism is not inherently future-proof, as Marx did not account for the modern consumer culture in today's society. In our modern economy, the entertainment sector serves the masses, not just the elite, making it a major sector for several industries. The video game industry is the largest of the entertainment sector, by a considerable margin (Richter). I have chosen the video game industry to examine the applicability of Marxism for this very reason, and because of the abhorrent working conditions. As some examples of these conditions, employees work over 100 hours a week for several months ahead of a game's release (Forsdick). Some companies foster a culture of sexual harassment (Novet). In one notable case, the CEO of

Activision-Blizzard received a \$200 million bonus, just days after firing over 200 employees in 2021 (Lee). Monetization schemes have become increasingly more prevalent. At first, monetization consisted of the purchase of the game itself. Players would receive a physical disk or cartridge that is compatible with current consoles and home computers. After one or two years, players could see downloadable-content, or DLC, become available as an expansion of the original video game. Over time, the video game industry has replaced physical mediums with digital licenses to play a game in whatever current state it is available in. DLC has become increasingly costly, and typically offers little in the way of playable value. In-game shops have become prevalent in offering microtransactions, which allows players to pay money to skip parts of a game they find unenjoyable or receive a temporary boost. Microtransactions are offered as a range, from as little as \$1 to \$100 or more.

The way the video game industry treats its workers and employees remains the same as the industries Karl Marx wrote about, where the bourgeoisie exploits workers and consumers. The goal of the exploitation is to distract the lower class from their alienation, defined as the disconnection of people from their work. Alienation leads to the people feeling a common lack of purpose from their work, which in turn causes existential dread from a sense of purposelessness. In our case, the video game industry exploits this common sense of alienation by selling an immersive, life-like escape from reality. Additional distractions come from the separations which the bourgeoisie envelop the proletariat in, such as culture wars or shallow comparisons to others on social media. The root of discontentment in our world is due in part to these modes of separation. The other root of discontentment, I contend, is our modern consumer culture inviting our own exploitation.

The summation of the behaviors we see in our society forms modern consumer culture, easily demonstrated in our response to manufactured instant gratification. The use of audio and visual design elements to lure consumers into a virtual reality. Video game designers lure consumers with satisfying gameplay loops, a core 30 seconds of a video game that offers instant gratification to the player. There can be multiple gameplay loops available to a player, such as puzzle solving, combat, or movement challenges. The player's motivation to continue playing a game is derived from the gameplay loop's success in providing instant gratification to a player. A well-crafted loop draws the player back for hundreds of hours, effectively forming an addictive escape from reality. Karl Marx wrote of the addictive escape of his time, in his introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (Marx). In Marx's time, religion was the "opium of the people", an addictive force to make the proletariat feel better about their lot in life.

In our time, instant gratification serves as the "opium of the people", exemplified most clearly in video games. Nearly 80% of video game players are over the age of 18 (Stojanovic), and therefore will likely have a job. Therefore, video game consumers have a common sense of alienation, and crave any kind of coping mechanism to distract themselves from their alienation. Video games provide a way to escape into another world and distract from the consumer's alienation. The instant gratification found in video games functions as a coping mechanism, the "opium for the people" that Marx describes. Many gamers find themselves easily drawn into video games when they are highly stressed, worried, or saddened. Video games offer comfort and escapism in the form of instant gratification that they cannot achieve in real life. The video game industry exploits consumer's cravings by offering microtransactions to players, which offer an

option to players to spend cash to skip unappealing gameplay loops. Microtransactions serve their purpose, as shown in the recently released free mobile game called *Diablo Immortal*. Every day, *Diablo Immortal* earns more than \$1 million, solely from microtransactions (Middler).

Despite receiving the worst player-ratings of a video game in history, *Diablo Immortal* shows the financial success possible through the exploitation of consumer's cravings of instant gratification through microtransactions. Moreover, a recent report found it costs \$110,000 of a special kind of microtransaction called loot boxes to fully upgrade a character in *Diablo Immortal* (Middler).

Without loot boxes, it is impossible to fully upgrade a character by simply playing the game.

Loot boxes in particular have drawn significant attention from regulatory authorities, as the UK Gambling Commission defines loot boxes as a game option to "provide players with the opportunity to pay to open a box and acquire an unknown quantity and quality of in-game items for use within the game" (Miller). Loot boxes are a recent monetization method devised in the last few years. Accordingly, while the legal precedent continues to evolve over time, Tim Miller of the Commission states, ultimately "Whether gambling or not, we all have a responsibility to keep children and young people safe." The video game industry devised microtransactions, and loot boxes, to exploit consumer's craving of the modern "opium of the people" found in instant gratification.

Furthermore, the video game industry preys on one of the most basic of human emotions: fear. Humans thrive as social creatures as they seek to fit in wherever possible. The industry manipulates the fear of missing out, or FOMO, by their increasing practice of implementing artificial deadlines. Cleverly disguised as pre-order bonuses, in-game events, or time-sensitive rewards, manipulation of FOMO creates hooks available for consumers to purchase. For consumers, missing a hook means missing out on a piece of content, gameplay, story, or

feature—forever. The goal of completing a game to 100% becomes impossible, even if the consumer lacks the desire to share their accomplishments with others. If the consumer formed an addiction to the instant gratification-inducing gameplay loops, their FOMO activates and begins imagining life after biting the hook. Assuming the consumer doesn't convince themselves to bite the hook, they often will once their FOMO peaks as friends and family share their own experiences biting the hook.

To examine the concept of hooks in more detail, we'll examine two games from the Pokemon franchise, the highest grossing video game franchise in history: Pokemon Brilliant Diamond and Pokemon Shining Pearl, referred to as BD/SP. These games, sold separately for \$60 USD or together in a double-pack for \$120 USD, offered a slew of pre-order bonuses, such as access to exclusive Pokemon. Likewise, playing BD/SP immediately after launch offered access to mythical Pokemon only available for the first 30 days. The option with the most bonuses was the purchase of the digital double-pack for \$120 USD. Pokemon BD/SP have the same code and structure, with only 20 or so Pokemon exclusive to one version or the other, designated by an internal flag (McFerran). Nintendo and the Pokemon Company used exclusive and limited Pokemon as a hook for consumers to purchase the same game twice. The purchase of a digital license to play BD/SP also eliminates distribution costs associated with manufacturing cartridges, installing the game to the cartridge, packaging, shipping, and paying a portion to a retailer. Lower capacity cartridges are cheaper than higher capacity cartridges. In an effort to minimize distribution costs, Nintendo and the Pokemon Company used low capacity cartridges which cannot store the entire purchased video game (Michael), despite consumers purchasing physical options to avoid the need to download software. With consumers hooked by the allure of exclusive and limited Pokemon, Nintendo and the Pokemon Company exploited consumer's

FOMO in order to entice players to make the most profitable purchase of the digital double-pack for \$120 USD.

Beyond the money-making schemes, ownership itself now presents a new level of exploitation of consumers. The purchase of a physical disk or cartridge of a video game shows tangible consumer ownership, playable on a compatible system in perpetuity. In stark contrast, digital licenses to play a video game frequently require an internet connection to play, to download and install the latest updates from the publisher. A video game publisher has the capability to end support for purchased digital game licenses, currently to the extent to “prevent players from downloading and installing DLC” (Jiang) that is purchased. The inherent issues of the pseudo-ownership model of video games comes to light in the inevitable situation that a publisher removes a game from their digital storefront. If the consumer is connected to the internet, which is typically required for digital game licenses, the consumer’s console will download the publisher’s update and suddenly vanish.

It is becoming increasingly commonplace for games to be sold digitally, offering no guarantee for how long the purchased game license will be available to play. Over the decades, the video game industry moves ever closer to, and currently lies in the last transitory stage towards, the pseudo-ownership model. While video games may not seem a concern to older adults, the video game industry tends to pioneer monetization and ownership models that other industries then adopt for their own goods and services. As an example, just a couple of weeks ago BMW announced a software subscription service. For \$18 a month, consumers can purchase a software key to unlock using their heated seats (Vincent). The physical property is owned by the car owner, but is inaccessible to activate due to implementation of the video game industry’s

pseudo-ownership model. As a result, new BMW consumers purchase a car equipped with heated seats, but cannot activate those heated seats without paying a monthly charge.

Many industries outside of video games are currently aiming to implement the pseudo-ownership model from the video game industry. The issue of property ownership is the cornerstone of dialectical materialism. Marx wrote about property ownership in length in *The Communist Manifesto*. “The distinguishing feature of Communism is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property” (Bender and Marx 68). The wage-labor of a worker does not create property for the worker, Marx argues, but instead creates “capital” (Bender and Marx 68), a type of property that the worker should own but is co-opted by the bourgeoisie. The “capital” accumulates under the bourgeoisie and becomes a proclamation of the sum of wage-labor exploited to create capital. Marx’s philosophy of property ownership and capital directly applies to the ownership issues stemming from the video game industry.

Marx accurately predicted the ownership issues in the video game industry, rebutting those who disagree with the “abolition of bourgeois property”:

You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths. You reproach us, therefore, with intending to do away with a form of property, the necessary condition for whose existence is the non-existence of any property for the immense majority of society (Bender and Marx 71-72).

Marx calls out the type of ownership issues seen in the video game industry, declaring that these ownership issues result from the “non-existence of any property” for the people. As modern industries move towards pseudo-ownership of goods and services, consumers will no

longer own “any property”. Therefore, Marx argues, the proletariat must reject the oppression of the bourgeoisie and abolish the “bourgeois property.”

Given the similar exploitation of workers, and consumers in today’s economy, Marx remains relevant. The only question left is whether the dialectical process will fundamentally change the conditions seen in the video game industry. The proletariat revolution begins when key issues occur, such as the common sense of alienation, “bourgeois property” and broader ownership issues, and the masses dependence upon the “opium of the people”. Yet the world has not transitioned to a single, unified Communist state. Ultimately, I believe this is due to the addictive nature of modern consumer culture. The phrase “opium of the people” conveys the addictive nature of a distraction from alienation. Modern consumer culture embraces the “opium” needed to distract from the looming sense of alienation ever-present in consumer’s minds. The enormous ongoing financial success of *Diablo Immortal* demonstrates the people’s need for “opium”, in this case through instant gratification from a loot box microtransaction. Despite consumers despising this type of monetization model, the video game industry forcefully moves forward with microtransactions and consumers have the choice to either take the “opium” and find distraction from their alienation, or suffer crippling existentialism from the withdrawals of “opium”.

The video game industry reinforces the choice between “opium” or crippling existentialism by their manipulation of FOMO, as seen in Pokemon BD/SP. The peer pressure of everyone around you biting the hook that is “opium” and enjoying themselves inevitably leads to doubting a decision to reject the “opium”. If you reject “opium”, you reject the social connections that derive from indulging upon the craving for “opium”. Those who take the “opium” seem more joyous and energetic, and the video game industry manipulates FOMO to

entice those not already taking the “opium” to start. The newest experiment by the video game industry, the pseudo-ownership model, should have been the point consumers found the will to reject the “opium.” Instead, digital purchases become increasingly more common as modern consumer culture embraces a new age of the internet and convenience. While outside of the scope of this paper, many more issues exist that further exacerbate consumers' addiction to modern consumer culture, both within and outside of the video game industry. Ultimately, I believe rather than religion, consumerism has become the new “opium for the people”. Superficial in nature and simply a temporary distraction, and yet time and time again we see the people side with their addiction to “opium.”

Furthermore, many different opinions about all of the issues I’ve discussed in this paper exist. While I am a consumer of video games, I can’t possibly speak for all consumers. I say this because every single issue I’ve raised, just as many people agree and disagree with me. Marx’s theory is contingent upon one key aspect: unity. An entire industry’s workers uniting to protest their oppressors isn’t going to happen. For as many people who believe that their trade union helps secure them higher wages and secure employment, just as many believe that it’s up to the individual to advocate for themselves and secure for themselves a higher wage and secure employment. Marx’s belief in a single, uniform, and objective reality just is not true. If subjectivity can exist, then as many different realities exist as there are people on Earth.

A glaring flaw that I cannot overlook supersedes the many elements of Marx’s philosophy that resonate with me. The implementation of Marxism must assume Marx’s belief in a single, uniform, and objective reality. Even if definitive right and definitive wrong weave into the fabric of the universe, this fabric is invisible to us. Every human decides for themselves what they believe is right and what is wrong. The final hurdle in Marxism overcoming our modern

consumer culture is this concept of free will and agency. Individuals wanting to actively fight against the proletariat revolution can make that choice because the individual has free will and agency. Likewise, individuals wanting to remain neutral for the sake of their modern conveniences can make that choice because the individual has free will and agency. Individual free will results in an endless combination of choices. As a result, most people have chosen “opium”, because it is the path of least resistance. The path of least resistance is seen throughout most of our life, as we willingly accept modern consumer culture and its embrace of “opium.” The “opium” makes the scathing path bearable at least, and for most people that is enough. So long as society chooses the “opium”, Marx’s dialectical materialism will never find success.

In summation, Marx’s dialectical materialism can overcome modern consumer culture, as exemplified in the video game industry. Marxism overcoming modern consumer culture has two paths: either free will ceases to exist, or the entirety of society exercises their free will to reject the “opium” of instant gratification. In this paper, the video game industry has demonstrated time and time again that consumers will put up with almost anything so long as it provides some “opium” to distract from their looming sense of alienation. The scenarios and issues present in the video game industry were outlined by Karl Marx hundreds of years ago, and the application of Marx’s dialectical materialism allows the analysis of current events. Relevancy is determined by the applicability to present-day society; clearly, Marxism is relevant. Academic relevance however, is separate from practical relevance. Application of Marxist principles to analyze current events by the people determines if Marxism is practically relevant. The people avoid the application of Marxism in their analysis, as they have accepted their role as workers and embraced the “opium” of modern consumer culture, as each has simply become a cog in the capitalist machine.

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