

IP Production and the Capitalist Logic of Games World-building

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INTRODUCTION

World-building is a term that is used widely throughout games production and analysis with few critical attempts to understand it. While there have been some recent important works that have considered games world-building from a historical (Kocurek and Payne 2024) and textual (Ruberg 2025) perspective, its relationship to capitalism is mostly unexplored. Building off the work of various theorists of world-building (Ekman and Taylor 2016; Hassler-Forest 2016) this paper forwards a theory of games world-building that emphasises the embeddedness of game worlds in capitalism. Through analysing the political-economic construction of the game worlds of the *Fallout* franchise (1988–present) and *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019), I argue that world-building is not just a form of creative production but an important part in the development and prolonging of Intellectual Property (IP). World-building is the creation of what Marx (1992) defined as “fixed capital”. For Marx, fixed capital is the portion of capital that remains fixed within the production process, only giving up a part of its value in production, in contrast to “circulating capital”, which is “completely consumed in every labour process” (p. 238). Examples of fixed capital include machines and farm animals, although perhaps the most useful metaphor for understanding game worlds is land, as franchising, legal infrastructure and the creation of IP turns the player’s relationship to the world closer to that of a rentier than a consumer (Srnicek 2021). Through outlining this relationship, I present a novel way of understanding the essential socio-economic nature of game worlds.

I then turn to how this affects the aesthetics of games. Building off the work of Fredric Jameson (1991) and Anna Kornbluh (2024), I argue that this political-economic relationship leads to a form of fictional world-production that lacks any sense of historicity or change. If game worlds are a store of “dead labour” (Marx 1990, p. 342), it is against the capitalist’s interest to make any substantial changes to the world, as this would be a waste of the value embedded within it. Through a brief analysis of the *Fallout* franchise, I argue that this economic relationship means big-budget game worlds tend towards stasis: endless, ever-present and always-on worlds that exist without any meaningful change. Even further, this stasis expresses the “political unconscious” (Jameson 2013) of what Anna Kornbluh (2024) calls “too-late” capitalism—a society where history has ended and the future feels increasingly foreclosed. The fixed nature of these worlds makes it harder for us to envision radical changes to the world in which we live: an aesthetic expression of “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009), the belief—to quote Thatcher—that there “there is no alternative”.

Finally, I look towards a game which resists this tendency towards stasis through a deep embedding of historicity into the gameworld: ZA/UM’s 2019 role-

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playing game *Disco Elysium*. Instead of a static world, I argue that the game presents the narrative period as only a single moment in a much larger process of historical change, destabilising the importance of the game's specific historical moment. I argue that *Disco Elysium* game forwards a model of historical, process-based world-building that recognizes the importance of not just the people and places that currently exist, but those in the past and the things yet to come. I finish by showing how *Disco Elysium* still succumbed to its nature as fixed capital, through a very brief discussion of the legal-financial battle over the *Elysium* IP (People Make Games 2023). I show how even those works that push against world-building's nature as fixed capital production are still often subsumed into it due to the overwhelming elasticity of capitalist logics of world-building.

Across these examinations, my paper expresses the need for a critical understanding of world-building within games and media studies. If, as Ruberg (2025) suggests, all games are just worlds—and thus all games-production is really a form of world-building—then it is crucial that world-building as both a practice and rhetorical construct is better understood from textual, philosophical, historical and political-economic perspectives. Understanding worlds is necessary for understanding games, and this paper is an important and novel contribution for better understanding the economics and ideologies that guide late capitalist games production, a necessary step to understanding a way out. In doing so, this paper suggests how we can reclaim world-building as a radical utopian practice, what Zigon (2017) calls an “experimentation with an otherwise” (para 9).

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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BIO

Finn Dawson (he/him) is a PhD Candidate at the University of Sydney researching worlds and world-building in digital games, and their relationship to capitalist social relations. He has presented on world-building, virtual worlds, and realism, and has co-authored a paper on South by South West (SXSW) Sydney 2023. He has a forthcoming chapter on lore hunting in Fromsoftware games, and a forthcoming chapter on immediacy and games.