

## Chapter 5

# Apportioned Commodity Fetishism and the Transformative Power of Game Studies

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the ways in which the field of Game Studies helps shape popular understandings of player, play, and game, and specifically how the field alters the conceptual, linguistic, and discursive apparatuses that gamers use to contextualize, describe, and make sense of their experiences. The chapter deploys the concept of apportioned commodity fetishism to analyze the phenomena of discourse as practice, persona, the vagaries of game design, recursion, lexical formation, institutionalization, systems of self-effectiveness, theory as anti-theory, and commodification.*

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## INTRODUCTION

From its earliest days, the video game industry has capitalized on not only the technology that drives games but also on the people who make them: Will Wright's *Raid on Bungeling Bay* (1984); Chris Crawford's *Balance of Power* (1985); Sid Meier's *Civilization* (1991); and Roberta Williams' *Anthology* (1996) are just a few of the many games in the Learning Games Initiative Research Archive that feature the developer's name—and not infrequently, a head shot—on the packaging.<sup>1</sup> More than for just superstar designers and skilled programmers and artists, however, the game industry is also known by gamers and many in the general public as an enterprise where exploited and harassed so-called “code monkeys” and victims of what is euphemistically termed by globalization pundits “global cost arbitrage” are employed, laborers whose job is to infuse games with cultural and economic value in return for low wages and staggering levels of stress.<sup>2</sup> If ever there were an industry in which the central commodity was commonly recognized as a product of many hands, it would be the video game industry.

Or would it? In this chapter, we propose that as a result of the unique combination of geek cultures, game cultures, and media studies cultures that have emerged since the 1980s, a curious facade has been constructed in and around the game industry that both reveals and masks the inner workings of the video game medium's cultural and political networks of production. As the byline of this chapter makes clear, we make this argument as part of a collective of game studies scholars who have been both independently and collaboratively studying games through the Learning Games Initiative since 1999. Although our respective areas of expertise vary widely, for many years we have together tracked the interactions of academic and gamer discourses as they manifest in popular, subcultural, and trade venues. Like all discourses, the ones that prevail are contradictory: they demand that one work to experience fun, to reframe tyrannical control over player behavior as the auteur's privilege, to cast technical details such as shader values and particle systems as primarily aesthetic considerations, and to define the video game medium itself in ways that are more perambulatory than specific. We accept these contradictions as predictable outcomes of a culture industry that trades in commerce-driven play and the business of fun, and each of the authors has her or his own approach to understanding these industry-culture dynamics.

It was the charge of this volume's editors, however, to examine how video games “cause players to shift perspectives.” And this charge brought into focus for us the fact that the enormously complex set of interactions among gamers, producers, industrial processes, cultural adaptations, subjectivity, and identity performance not only produces a perpetually unfurling network of contradictory discourses, but also requires a dense but malleable facade that, like a radiologist's lead apron, shields the most sensitive inner workings even as it enables a seemingly transparent perspective. In effect, the set of relationships that has emerged among game producers, distributors, and consumers is such that a discourse of labor is now a popular commonplace even though a clear understanding of how those relationships function interdependently is almost entirely unknown. We call this phenomenon “apportioned commodity fetishism,” by which we mean the perceptual tendency of the social relations involved in commodity production (including games) to be obscured, even as a discursive scaffold is constructed to give these fetishized objects a multi-dimensional cultural-economic topology that includes a characterization of the labor that assembled them. Put simply, we argue that the discourses of the game industry and its cultures operate together to give the appearance that games-as-commodities have not been disassociated from the labor that produced them—i.e., designers, artists, programmers, and so forth—when in fact knowledge about this labor has developed over time to mask a vast array of important labor-related details, from internal management practices, to workplace abuses, to wage-impacting financial decisions.

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