

# Playbour or Leisure: Unveiling Subjectivity in Chinese Digital Game Labor Landscape

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## INTRODUCTION

The widespread adoption and evolution of digital information technology have interconnected society through the Internet, leading to a comprehensive integration of digital elements into everyday life. At the same time, the production of the digital world also reproduces the labor contradictions akin to those in traditional production, leading the situation in which labor in digital-related industries is exploited by digital capital. This phenomenon has developed into an important issue known as digital labor.

Digital games or video games are immensely popular worldwide. The interaction between players and games is not only restricted and influenced by social reality, but also enriches and creates a diverse gaming culture. The perspective of digital labor provides a critical political economy lens for the study of games. In his study of modders, Kücklich (2005) proposed the concept of *playbour*, pointing out that not only players forfeit their corresponding intellectual property rights for the production carried out by them in their leisure time, but their creations are also utilized by game manufacturers to proliferate further.

Game researchers have carried out extensive empirical research on whether the gaming behavior of professional gamers (such as game streamers, e-sports players, power levelings, paid companions, etc.) and non-professional gamers (also called ordinary players) is exploited by game manufacturers and digital capital. Generally, scholars have concluded that the core of playbour concept is labor, with player's affect and subjectivity being utilized. Consequently, the core themes of previous research were critiquing leisure alienation and emotional alienation. However, Zong (2023) found that that comes a large-scale phenomenon on social platforms which players spontaneously quit gaming or engaged in collective protest to communicate with game manufacturers and platforms. These actions reflect how players striving for independent consciousness and self-liberation. Some research has mentioned players' subjectivity within the frame of playbour and affective labour. But they didn't affirm that players' subjectivity can break free from being exploited. Therefore, this article will focus on the game walkthroughs (Hereinafter referred to as walkthroughs) created by ordinary players, aiming to explore whether the production of ordinary players can genuinely reflect their subjectivity.

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Wirman (2009) divides the productivity of players into instrumental productivity and expressive productivity, and walkthroughs belong to the instrumental productivity which "yields new and altered game texts that offer tools for more effective play". Walkthrough is an important part of player experience and game culture. The first known walkthrough, *Adventure-350 points* by Will Crowther and Don Woods, was distributed through Arpanet in 1977. In the 1980s, a growing number of players began creating highly professional walkthroughs, which were circulated through offline discussions and informal magazines. Concurrently, game publishers recognized the value of game information and walkthroughs, leading to the production of dedicated game magazines. Nintendo, for instance, established a walkthrough counselor office during the widespread Nintendo mania in America in 1989. However, as we entered the 21st century, the landscape of walkthroughs shifted once again, with online players dominating the field. Offline methods of sharing walkthroughs gradually became obsolete. Game manufacturers now consolidate walkthroughs and additional details into ancillary publications for fans.

Although walkthroughs are closely attached to the game content, they can be separated from the game itself and spread on multiple platforms. Since it is unpractical for walkthrough creators to obtain direct and stable remuneration from game manufacturers or platforms, which is in line with the concept of playbour. According to the conclusions of previous research, walkthroughs are digital labor products created by players in their leisure time and can be utilized by game manufacturers and digital capital for proliferation.

On the English-speaking internet, mature walkthroughs are often distributed through centralized platforms, such as collaboratively written wikis and fandom websites. In contrast, on the Chinese internet, walkthroughs are predominantly created by individual players who explicitly claim copyright attribution. Chinese creators share their creations across various social platforms, resulting in scattered player interactions, hindering the formation of a unified identity and collective influence. Notably, Chinese walkthroughs are primarily produced ordinary players who do not and cannot rely on walkthroughs as a consistent source of income, which makes it rare for them to transition into professional players.

Based on this, this paper aims to explore the following questions by focusing on the digital labor products of walkthroughs. First, how do the creators themselves perceive the behavioral attributes and content attributes of walkthrough creation? Will they show corresponding obedience or resistance to their status as playbour? Second, do creators rely on interaction and emotional connections among other players regarding walkthroughs? Do these interactions and emotional feedback further enhance their creative enthusiasm, thereby promoting the activity of the player group? Third, have creators maintained their personal rights in the process of creating and publishing walkthroughs, and have they consciously accumulated social capital for their own benefit?

In this paper, I will conduct one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with at least 14 Chinese players who possess sufficient experience with walkthroughs in Chinese. The Chinese content from these in-depth interviews will be analyzed.

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