

# Poverty (Is All Fun) and Games

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In late capitalism, material possessions hold a dual meaning. First, they are, as they used to be, objects that help us satisfy our needs; things that help us stay satiated, healthy, secure, satisfied; help keep us from poverty. Then, in abundance, they become clutter: an amassment of objects that cannot satisfy any needs, either because they cannot be reached or found due to their large numbers, or are forgotten, or because one has multiple objects satisfying the same need, or the need was non-existent in the first place. Living clutter-free becomes a privilege only available to those who have enough time and resources to manage the overflow and who can risk losing something instrumental in the process.

The dream of a clutter-free life is not new. It was present in various moments of history, when materialism, usually in connection to imperial politics, turned rampant. The opposition towards consumerism was propagated by Diogenes, the Stoics, Francis of Assisi, the hippies, and, in recent decades, by the movement of minimalism. The goals of the minimalist movement are both private and public; it focuses on the social responsibility that should accompany consumption, but also on the pleasures of a modest life in which one is free to focus on things that matter most to them. Robin Greenfield, for example, represents pro-environmental minimalism, Marie Kondo (2014) focuses on the clutter-free and thus more comfortable life, while Barbara Ehrenreich (2002) or Marta Sapala (2009) write on their and others respective social experiments to live, or rather, simulate living on the verge of financial survival.

Such simulations are also present in digital games. Budgeting is featured in the vast array of games, from ones in which it is only one of many mechanics — RPGs, strategies, simulators — to the ones that are famous for their financial and capitalist themes such as *The Sims* or *Animal Crossing*. There are also games that focus on the materiality of everyday objects and their relation to the story of the main character, such as *Gone Home* (Bednorz 2021) or *Unboxing*, and finally, the ones that simulate both material and financial lack, such as *Spent* (McKinney 2011), *Ayiti: The Cost of Life* (Global Kids and GameLab 2006), *Broke: the game* (Gold 2020) and *Nanopesos* (Gormaz 2019).

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The close reading of the last four games is especially interesting from the perspective of poverty and minimalism, as they all attempt to simulate the financial struggle: of a single parent in the US (*Spent*), of a family living in Haiti (*Ayiti*), of multiple people struggling, e.g. with homelessness (*Broke*), or of a young professional earning the minimum wage in Chile (*Nanopesos*). Most of these games can be considered broken games (Frasca 2000), as they make it impossible for the player to win, or limit the scope of possible victory, or even limit the possibility of replay, perhaps to protect their didactic strength. All of them proclaim that their goal is to simulate poverty and thus make their players more open and understanding towards those struggling financially, and it seems that they might be successful in doing so (Hernández-Ramos et al. 2019).

These games, however, can also be played for fun, and the result of such activity is a dopamine rush like the one that results from engaging in minimalist activities: getting rid of the clutter, successfully dealing with fewer possessions and smaller spending, or even feeling the thrill of living on the verge which — both in minimalism and in these games — is just simulated. Adam Crowley (2022) poignantly calls a similar set of activities *slumming*, as in living in bad conditions while not being used to them and being able to afford not to do so. Slumming only lasts for a limited time, and people who slum are not actually facing the inescapability and long-term effects of such a situation. If these games are played like that, they are transformed from texts promoting understanding and social responsibility to the ones that gamify underprivilege for pleasure and possibly take the gravity away from the topic. Perhaps this is the reason why there are not many games that employ poverty as their main theme: gamifying the lack of financial and social privilege might come dangerously close to *poornography*, the exploitation of the impoverished by capitalizing on the images of their poverty (Davis 2022).

However, I argue that such play, if it is not combined with blatant disregard towards people struggling financially and the social reality of capitalism, is not harmful. Playing with limits and lack might help us get accustomed to living with less and undermine the unreal, wasteful standards set by advertisement. It can also, like texts from other media on various kinds of scarcity, make the players aware of their own privilege, and offer a satisfying and relaxing pastime, especially for those who enjoy budgeting challenges and activities such as organizing and tidying up (which might also be helpful to neurodivergent people or those who have obsessive-compulsive traits or tendencies). The question that is the most interesting to me is the one about the further possibilities of designing poverty and frugality-related games, both because it is related to the growing understanding of limits and losses in games and because it creates a possibility of exploring further paths of game-derived satisfaction combined with moral value, not stripped of it. As Magdalena Kozyra (2019) argues while applying Jacek Halberstam's theory to games, failing in the game has a queer, anti-capitalist potential. And while the market is flooded with game texts on getting rich produced to get rich (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009), why not engage in the ones about getting poor?

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