

Ludotariat: problematizing the gaming class

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The paper aims to describe and problematize the notion of ‘ludotariat’. Introduced by Bruno Vétel (2013) as a critical alternative to the concept of playbourers, and strictly connected with the critique of economy, the notion of ‘ludotariat’ has not been widely adopted in game studies. Vétel defined the notion according to the growing interest in grinding, farming, playbour, and research on Real Money Trading (RMT), but curiously without references to the most influential critical works at the time (Dyer-Witheford & Peuter, 2009; Kücklich, 2005). In his work ludotariat designates “those who contribute to society solely through their capacity to play and we could add, not through their capacity to enjoy themselves, but their capacity to produce inside a game.” (Vétel, 2013, p. 6). Using this definition as the basis of my approach, I would like to introduce three original problematizations that expand and rewrite the original concept. In my reworking of this concept I want to differentiate ludotariat from playbour, so I will not go with the reviewer’s suggestions to include players working for other players into this class. In my analysis I lean closer to describing ludotariat along the lines of Graeber’s reflection on bullshit jobs (Graeber 2018, 23).

Firstly, Vétel analyzes ludotariat in the context of value generation through RMT, while newer studies on game procedures point to the shift towards invigilation capitalism, governance, and practices of data and attention exploitation (Lassila, 2022, p. 6). These practices produce players who – in terms of Möring & Leino - are ‘inauthentic’ as they “appear to be working for the game”. (Möring & Leino, 2016, pp. 149–150). This means that ludotarians do not have to engage in RMT to be part of a new class, working “for the game” might mean playing not to pay. Moreover, viewing this class through the “capacity to contribute to society” might be counterintuitive, as “working for the game” might mean working against society in the sense that it is an excessive consumption of energy and time untranslatable to any form of social change. Ludotariat would therefore be better defined by wasteful consumption (Wilk, 2022) and practices related to fast-play, radically opposite of what Rainforest Scully-Blaker envisioned as an alternative way to look at leisure time and productivity (Scully-Blaker, 2024, 511, 516-518).

Secondly, I propose to rewrite and redefine ludotariat by comparing it to the previous iterations of the exploited class, namely the proletariat, and precariat (Serada, 2024). By reconstructing the major arguments forming the critique of ideology aimed at different stages of capitalism I want to readdress the core idea of exploitation, and its

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meaning for ludotariat. In the case of the proletariat, it is the alienating form of work that disjoins the workers from the fruits of their labor (Marx, 2024, p. 691). In the case of the precariat, it is the “lack of secure work-based identity” and “the seven forms of labor-related security” (labor market, employment, job, skill reproduction, income, and representation) (Standing, 2011, pp. 9–10). I argue that defining ludotariat through the alienation from the means of production, and the specific modes of production imposed by digital governance (Frelik, 2016) is better than Vétel’s original idea concerning the capacity to produce within a game. What does the ludotariat produce, and for whom it produces – these questions remain to be answered.

Lastly, I will problematize the notion of ludotariat along the lines of biopolitical critique of games (Dyer-Witheford & Peuter, 2009; Kłosiński, 2024). I will focus on questions of regulation of life with the use of game design (Jagoda, 2021, 14, 20). Examples of such regulatory mechanisms have been critically examined in analyses of avatars as apparatuses disciplining players to think, act, and learn patterns according to their affordances (Apperley & Clemens, 2016, pp. 115–121), and free-to-play models as governance mechanisms serving companies as invigilation data acquisition tools (Lassila, 2022, p. 14), an extension of algorithmic culture (Baerg, 2013; Galloway, 2006).

The paper will reference aspects of ludotarianization in 4 contemporary games: *Warframe* (Digital Extremes, 2013), *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2020), *Star Citizen* (Cloud Imperium Games, 2021), and *Helldivers 2* (Arrowhead Game Studios, 2024) to exemplify what types of signifying game elements concern governance mechanisms critical to the ludotariat. The analysis will take into consideration gameplay loops, game economies, procedural rhetoric, and class rhetoric. Methodology-wise, the core of this study is a hermeneutic study of games complimented with autoethnography. On the one hand I will therefore use critical, biopolitical, and hermeneutic study of games as ludotopias – spaces of play, to focus on mechanisms developed to capture player attention and turn the play into work. On the other hand, I will analyze the ambivalent nature of ludotariat as a class of players who work for the game, by referencing available online sources where players identify play as work (YouTube videos, Reddit forums). My reflection on will also be based on an autoethnography conducted while playing the selected titles with a reflexive diary being the primary tool for gathering data for making sense of my acts of play (Deshbandhu, 2023, pp. 280–281), as well as understanding my situatedness (Lammes, 2007, pp. 28–29) as a ludotarian.

Keywords

Ludotariat, games, capitalism, governance, biopolitics

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