

The Infinite Game in the Engine of Control: Proletarianization, Platform Capitalism, and the Future of Playful Pleasure

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how contemporary game production software---specifically game engines and asset stores---systematically transforms the intrinsic pleasure of game development from James P. Carse's concept of an "infinite game" of open-ended creativity into a "finite game" of optimization and data extraction. Through a critical theory analysis of the Unity Engine ecosystem and AI-driven narrative tools like AI Dungeon, we argue that the political-economic logics of platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017) and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) enforce finite-game structures upon developers. This process is theorized as a triple movement of proletarianization (Stiegler 2010), where developer savoir-faire is captured by the platform; aesthetic standardization (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002), which creates a new digital "culture industry"; and the instrumentalization of creative intuition through datafication. The paper concludes by proposing a framework for reclaiming infinite-game development practices through critical technical literacy, open platforms, and a renewed valuation of non-instrumental creative labor.

Keywords

Infinite Play, Critical Theory, Game Production, Platform Capitalism, Unity Engine, AI Narrative, Bernard Stiegler, James P. Carse

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary digital game development landscape is defined by a central paradox: the proliferation of powerful, accessible tools has ostensibly democratized creation, yet this coincides with pervasive creative homogenization and systemic developer burnout (Anthropy 2012; Westecott 2013; O'Donnell 2014). This paper contends that this paradox is not accidental but is a direct consequence of the political economy embedded within the software itself. The very tools that promise a horizon of creative freedom often systematically structure, discipline, and delimit the nature of that creativity (Bogost 2015; Montfort and Bogost 2009).

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To theorize this phenomenon, we employ James P. Carse's (1986) foundational distinction between "finite games," played to win within established rules, and "infinite games," played for the sake of continuing play itself. We posit that the pleasure of game development, at its most profound, is an infinite game---a continuous, open-ended process of exploration, expression, and learning (Flanagan 2009). However, we demonstrate that the software ecosystems dominating the industry increasingly encode a finite-game logic. This logic is driven by the imperatives of platform capitalism (Srniczek 2017), which seeks to extract rent by intermediating creative ecosystems, and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019), which aims to mine behavioral data for prediction and control.

This process manifests as a digital proletarianization (Stiegler 2010), whereby the developer's *savoir-faire* (practical knowledge) is systematically captured and exteriorized by the technical system, leading to deskilling and dependency. Simultaneously, it accelerates a new, procedural iteration of the "culture industry" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002), standardizing aesthetic experience and producing a "pseudo-individuality" through modular, recombinant assets. Through an integrated analysis of the Unity Engine's political economy and the emergent paradigm of AI-driven narrative generation, this paper traces the mechanisms by which software re-engineers creative pleasure and speculates on the conditions of possibility for an "infinite game" of development within these platformized production environments.

METHODOLOGY: A CRITICAL PLATFORM STUDIES APPROACH

This paper employs a critical platform studies methodology, integrating political economic analysis with close technical examination of specific software ecosystems (Bogost and Montfort 2009; Gillespie 2010). Our case studies—the Unity Engine and AI Dungeon—were selected as paradigmatic examples that vividly illustrate the triple movement of proletarianization, standardization, and instrumentalization at different scales of creative practice.

Unity was chosen over other commercial engines like Unreal for its explicit platform strategy centered on the Asset Store and its positioning as an accessible tool for indie and mobile developers, making its extractive logic particularly visible. As the world's most popular game engine (Unity Technologies 2022), it represents a dominant production paradigm worthy of critical scrutiny. AI Dungeon serves as a compelling case study of generative AI in creative contexts due to its early market entry, explicit framing as a tool for "infinite" storytelling, and its clear operationalization of surveillance capitalist principles through its "free" model funded by data extraction.

Our analysis proceeds through a close reading of these platforms' technical architectures, business models, and discursive framings, interpreted through the fused theoretical lenses of Carse (1986), Stiegler (2010), Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), Srniczek (2017), and Zuboff (2019). This integrated approach allows us to trace how political-economic imperatives become materialized in software that subsequently structures creative practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INFINITE PLAY, PROLETARIANIZATION, AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

Finite and Infinite Games

James P. Carse's (1986) philosophical framework provides our core analytical lens. A finite game is played within defined rules, with known players, for the purpose of winning and ending the game. Its pleasure is teleological and extrinsic. An infinite game, in contrast, is played for the sole purpose of continuing the play. Its rules are mutable, its players can change, and its purpose is open-ended, regenerative, and intrinsic (Carse 1986, 3).

Applied to game development, the infinite game represents the autotelic pleasure of creation—the exploratory play with systems, aesthetics, and rules for its own sake (Sicart 2014). The industrial pressure to ship products, achieve key performance indicators (KPIs), and generate profit represents the finite game. This constitutive tension between intrinsic creative motivation and extrinsic commercial pressure forms our central analytical axis (Deuze 2007; Kirkpatrick 2013).

Proletarianization and the Culture Industry

Bernard Stiegler (2010), building on Marx's concept of proletarianization as the separation of workers from the means of production, argues that industrialization leads to a "loss of knowledge" as cognitive and practical savoir-faire is captured by technical systems. In digital contexts, this occurs when developers' creative and technical knowledge is outsourced to software platforms, deskilling creators and rendering them dependent on external systems (Stiegler 2010, 32-35). This process of deskilling is not merely technical but also epistemological, eroding the practitioner's deep, embodied understanding of their craft (Sennett 2008).

This process of standardization and deskilling resonates powerfully with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's (2002) critique of the "culture industry." They argued that industrial cultural production eliminates critical, challenging elements of art, replacing them with standardized formulas designed for passive consumption and creating a "pseudo-individuality" where superficial variations mask an underlying homogeneity (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 94-98). The game asset store, as we will show, is a precise digital instantiation of this logic.

Platform and Surveillance Capitalism

Nick Srnicek's (2017) analysis of platform capitalism describes business models that profit by intermediating and extracting rent from interactions. Digital game engines are paradigmatic platforms, functioning as "digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact" and monetizing this intermediation (Srnicek 2017, 48). Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) theory of surveillance capitalism describes a new economic logic that claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data, which is then used to create prediction products aimed at tuning and modifying behavior for profit and control (Zuboff 2019, 8). Integrated analytics in game development tools embody this logic, transforming player and developer behavior into data for optimization.

These theoretical frameworks collectively illuminate how game production software structurally re-engineers creative pleasure from the open-ended poiesis of infinite play toward the closed, instrumental telos of finite, extractive ends (Berry 2011; Fuchs 2014).

THE UNITY ENGINE: THE CULTURE INDUSTRY AS A PLATFORM

The Unity Engine presents itself as a democratizing force, a gateway to infinite creative possibilities. However, a critical examination reveals it as a powerful apparatus that enforces a new, digital iteration of the culture industry, operationalized through the logic of the platform. This section will dissect how the engine's two core components—the Asset Store and the Analytics Suite—function in concert to proletarianize the developer's craft and discipline creative pleasure into a finite game of optimization and extraction.

The Asset Store: Proletarianization, Pseudo-Individuality, and the Platform Enclosure

The Unity Asset Store is far more than a marketplace; it is the primary mechanism through which the logic of the culture industry is encoded directly into the creative workflow. It creates a condition of modular Taylorism, where the holistic process of game creation is broken down into discrete, purchasable units—models, scripts, sound effects, and entire systems—that can be efficiently assembled on a digital production line (Nieborg and Poell 2018).

The pleasure offered by this system is potent but fundamentally transformative. The intrinsic, infinite-game pleasure of overcoming a technical-artistic challenge—the deep satisfaction of spending days learning a shader language to create a specific water effect, for instance—is short-circuited by the extrinsic, finite-game pleasure of a financial transaction. With a few clicks, the developer achieves a "victory": the problem is solved. This immediate gratification, however, comes at the cost of what Stiegler (2010) identifies as proletarianization. In the original Marxist sense, the industrial worker was separated from the means of production and the *savoir-faire* of their craft. Stiegler updates this for the cognitive era, arguing that digital technologies lead to a "loss of knowledge" as cognitive functions are outsourced to the technical system.

The developer using the Asset Store is proletarianized in this precise sense. The *savoir-faire* of the 3D modeler—the intimate knowledge of topology that ensures clean animation, the skill of UV mapping for optimal texture space, the artistic eye for hand-painted textures—is captured, exteriorized, and commodified. This knowledge no longer resides primarily in the embodied practice of the developer but is crystallized within the purchased asset. While the use of assets can legitimately accelerate prototyping or empower solo developers to achieve scope previously impossible (a form of democratization), the structural pressure of the store privileges a specific type of assembly. The developer risks being transformed from a craftsman with a deep, intuitive understanding of their medium into a manager of prefabricated components. While 'remixing' assets can be a valid creative act, the platform's economic incentives push not toward thoughtful recontextualization, but toward efficient, friction-less assembly. Their relationship with their own game becomes increasingly abstract, mediated by the catalog of the store rather than the plasticity of the code.

This process of deskilling is the engine for the aesthetic homogenization that Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) predicted. The proliferation of a recognizable "Unity look"—a certain sheen to the lighting, a commonality in low-poly model aesthetics, the reuse of popular particle effects and UI systems—is not a matter of collective bad taste. It is the direct, systemic outcome of a platform that incentivizes efficiency over originality. This creates what Adorno termed "pseudo-individuality." Developers believe they are expressing their unique vision by creating a specific combination of store assets—this character model with that environment pack, those sound effects with this UI kit. This combinatorial freedom provides a sense of agency and choice. However, this individuality is merely a superficial layer over a deep structural sameness. The fundamental building blocks are standardized, and thus the aesthetic outcomes, despite their surface variations, converge.

This entire system is underwritten by the political-economic logic of platform capitalism, as detailed by Srnicek (2017). Unity Technologies' primary goal is not to sell a perfected tool, but to establish and maintain a platform. The engine is often free or low-cost at the point of entry, acting as a loss leader to onboard users into the ecosystem. The real value and the primary revenue stream lie in the Asset Store, where Unity intermediates the transaction between asset creators and asset consumers, extracting a rent (a commission) from every sale. This is a classic platform strategy: create an enclosed digital environment where value is co-created by users (both asset makers and buyers) and then monetize the interactions within that enclosure (Srnicek, 2017). The pleasure of efficient creation for the developer is the very fuel that powers Unity's platform capitalist machine, locking them into a cycle of dependency where their own creative proletarianization becomes the source of the platform's profit.

This extractive logic reached its apotheosis in late 2023 with the 'Unity Runtime Fee' controversy. After achieving market dominance through years of accessible, low-cost entry, Unity attempted to unilaterally alter its Terms of Service to charge developers a fee per game installation. This event serves as the paradigmatic confirmation of Srnicek's platform capitalism thesis: once a platform achieves critical mass and 'locks in' its user base (in this case, developers dependent on Unity's proprietary architecture), it inevitably pivots from growth to aggressive rent extraction. The outrage from the development community was not merely financial but existential; it was the realization that the 'rules' of their finite game could be rewritten instantly by the platform owner, exposing the precarious nature of building a creative practice on enclosed, proprietary soil.

The Analytics Suite: Surveillance Capitalism and the Quantified Pleasure

If the Asset Store proletarianizes the developer's technical savoir-faire, Unity's analytics suite targets a more profound form of knowledge: creative intuition itself. This represents a shift from the exteriorization of manual and visual craft to the capture and quantification of the designer's cognitive and affective judgment (Andrejevic 2019).

The integration of services like Unity Analytics directly injects this logic into the heart of the design process. The infinite game of design is traditionally rooted in a designer's cultivated feel for pacing, challenge, reward, and narrative flow—a deep, often tacit, savoir-faire built through years of playing games, studying theory, prototyping, and

internalizing player feedback in a qualitative, dialogic manner. This process is inherently uncertain, a continuous, open-ended exploration of "what could be." Unity's analytics tools seek to eliminate this uncertainty by transforming player behavior into "behavioral surplus" (Zuboff, 2019). Every player death, every menu hover, every microtransaction, and every session length is captured, aggregated, and presented to the developer as objective truth.

The pleasure of designing a challenging but fair boss encounter, for instance, is fundamentally altered. The intrinsic, infinite-game pleasure—derived from the iterative process of tuning, testing, and finally achieving a moment of "flow"—is displaced by an extrinsic, finite-game pleasure. The designer's question shifts from the hermeneutic "Does this encounter feel emotionally resonant and mechanically satisfying?" to the instrumental "Does the data show an acceptable drop-off rate at this stage, and does it maximize the probability of in-game purchases?" The designer's gut feeling, their hard-won intuition, is systematically deskilled and devalued, replaced by the authority of the A/B test and the dashboard KPI.

This is the enactment of what Zuboff (2019) terms instrumentarian power: power exercised through the automated, medium-agnostic modification of behavior. The system does not command through coercion; it gently nudges through data. It creates a self-reinforcing cycle where data recommends a certain design pattern (e.g., the specific reward frequency proven to trigger dopamine loops), developers implement it to achieve their "finite-game" victory (meeting KPIs), its success is further validated by more data, and it becomes a new industry standard. This leads to a pervasive homogenization of interactive experience, a procedural "culture industry" where the very architectures of play are standardized (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). The thrilling, unpredictable uncertainty of a truly novel game mechanic is often data-mined out of existence in favor of the proven, the predictable, and the profitable.

The political-economic underpinning of this is crucial. For Unity Technologies, analytics services represent a lucrative, recurring revenue stream and a powerful mechanism of lock-in. The more a studio relies on Unity's data infrastructure to understand its players and guide its design, the more costly and technically difficult it becomes to switch to another engine. The developer becomes dependent not just on Unity's asset pipeline, but on its epistemic authority. The platform thus encloses not only the developer's tools and assets but also their very capacity to know their own audience and validate their own creative choices (Srnicsek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). The pleasure of creative discovery is, in this framework, re-engineered into the anxious pleasure of achieving a quantifiable victory in the finite game of behavioral optimization, a game whose rules are written by the surveillance capitalist platform and whose ultimate winner is the platform itself.

AI DUNGEON AND THE PROLETARIANIZATION

If Unity represents the proletarianization of technical and design skill, AI-driven narrative tools like AI Dungeon mark a logical and alarming escalation: the exteriorization of imagination itself. The emergence of AI-driven narrative tools like AI Dungeon represents the logical and alarming endpoint of the trajectory identified in the Unity Engine analysis. If Unity proletarianizes technical skill and design intuition, these generative AI systems target the most fundamental human faculty of all: imagination itself. This represents a shift from the exteriorization of *savoir-faire* (know-how) to the exteriorization of *savoir-penser* (know-how-to-think) and *savoir-*

ressentir (know-how-to-feel) (Stiegler, 2010). By examining AI Dungeon through the integrated lenses of Stiegler's proletarianization, Carse's infinite game, and Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, we can see how these tools re-engineer the very wellspring of creative pleasure, transforming the infinite game of storytelling into a finite game of prompt optimization and behavioral data extraction.

From Author to Prompt-Overseer: The Deskilling of Narrative Savoir-Faire

Traditional narrative design and creative writing are infinite games par excellence. The writer engages in a deep, open-ended dialogue with their own subconscious, their characters, and the emergent logic of the fictional world. The "rules"—the established lore, character motivations, and narrative tone—are not rigid constraints but mutable elements that can be adapted, subverted, or expanded to serve the higher purpose of continuing the compelling and meaningful play of the story (Carse, 1986). This process requires a specific savoir-faire: a hard-won, personal knowledge of narrative structure, character development, thematic resonance, and linguistic style, built over years of practice, reading, and lived experience. The core creative act is no longer generation but reaction and moderation. Proponents might argue that 'prompt engineering' constitutes a new form of savoir-faire—a skill of linguistic precision and negotiation with the latent space.

AI Dungeon, and similar Large Language Model (LLM) based tools, proletarianizes this fundamental creative faculty. The user's role undergoes a profound and deskilling shift from author to prompt-overseer. The infinite play of constructing a narrative from the ground up—of making intentional choices about plot, character, and language—is replaced by the finite game of "prompt engineering." This involves the user typing instructions and observing the AI's output, then trying new prompts to correct, steer, or cajole the AI back towards a coherent and satisfying path. The core creative act is no longer generation but reaction and moderation. However, unlike the infinite game of learning to paint or code, this skill is inherently fragile and dependent; it relies entirely on the opacity of a specific black-box model. When the model updates or the company alters its safety filters, this 'skill' is rendered obsolete overnight, revealing it not as deep knowledge, but as a temporary mastery of a finite, shifting interface.

The pleasure derived from this process is fundamentally different. The intrinsic, infinite-game pleasure of authorial mastery—the deep satisfaction of wrestling with a narrative problem and arriving at an elegant, personal solution—is replaced by an extrinsic, consumptive pleasure. The user experiences a sense of 'What will the AI generate next?' This dynamic mirrors what Natasha Dow Schüll (2012) identifies as the 'ludic loop' of gambling machines—a zone of suspended subjectivity where the goal is not to win, but to simply keep the machine flowing. It is the passive thrill of a slot machine payout rather than the active struggle of artistic creation (Stiegler, 2010). The creative struggle, which Stiegler argues is essential for the formation of psychic and collective individuality, is largely absent. The user is not strengthened or individuated by overcoming a creative challenge; they are merely managing the outputs of an automated system, their own imaginative savoir-faire rendered increasingly redundant.

The Illusion of Infinite Narrative and the Reality of Instrumentalization

AI Dungeon's marketing heavily leans on the promise of "infinite" stories, a claim that demands scrutiny through Carse's framework. While the combinatorial output of an LLM is vast, it is a simulated or prosthetic infinity, fundamentally bounded by the model's training data, algorithms, and parameters (Stiegler, 2010). The stories are infinite only in a quantitative, probabilistic sense, not in the qualitative, open-ended sense of Carse's infinite game. This is a cage of such immense scale and variety that it creates the illusion of freedom, while in reality, every output is a recombination of pre-existing linguistic and narrative patterns scraped from the web. It is the antithesis of the infinite game, which is driven by the human will to continue and transform play, not by the passive consumption of an endless, automated output.

This simulated infinity operates squarely within Zuboff's (2019) framework of surveillance capitalism. The platform is "free" to use because the real product is the user's own creative behavior. Every user input—every prompt, every upvote or downvote on an AI-generated response, every narrative path taken or abandoned—is valuable behavioral surplus. This data is the essential raw material used to further train, refine, and improve the AI model, enhancing its predictive power and commercial value. The "infinite game" of collaborative storytelling is thus corrupted into a finite game of data extraction, where the user's imaginative labor is instrumentarianized for the platform's economic gain (Zuboff, 2019). The user, believing they are playing, is in fact being played, their creative impulses mined as a free resource.

The long-term cultural consequence of this is a form of imaginative entropy. By outsourcing the imaginative labor of storytelling to a system that can only reconfigure the past, the collective reservoir of narrative *savoir-faire* risks stagnation. If the primary mode of engagement with stories becomes prompt-overseeing, the skills required to build a narrative from the ground up—the skills that produced the very literature and scripts that form the AI's training data—may atrophy over generations. This represents the ultimate victory of the finite game of platform capitalism: the enclosure and automation of human imagination itself, turning the most infinite of human games into a non-renewable resource to be mined until exhaustion. The pleasure of creation is reduced to the fleeting satisfaction of a well-crafted prompt, a finite victory in a game where the platform always wins.

SYNTHESIS AND SPECULATIVE FUTURES: TOWARDS AN INFINITE GAME DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

The integrated analysis of the Unity Engine and AI Dungeon reveals a consistent and alarming pattern, pointing toward what Stiegler (2010) might term a systemic symbolic misery in game development—a degradation of the symbolic capacities that constitute culture and knowledge. The tools of game production, operating under the dual hegemony of platform and surveillance capitalism, are not neutral conduits of creativity. Rather, they function as active, political agents that systematically convert the open-ended, intrinsically motivated, infinite game of creation (Carse 1986) into a closed, extrinsically motivated, finite game of optimization, efficiency, and data extraction. The profound pleasures of craft, intuition, and imaginative exploration—the very heart of creative *savoir-faire*—are thereby systematically re-encoded as the superficial pleasures of transactional efficiency, metric-based victory, and automated

consumption. This creates a powerful triple bind for the contemporary developer: the proletarianization of skill (Stiegler 2010), wherein knowledge is transferred from the individual to the technical system; the standardization of aesthetics (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002), which produces a homogenized cultural landscape; and the instrumentalization of creative intuition (Zuboff 2019), where design decisions are subordinated to behavioral prediction. All three are underpinned by the extractive, rent-seeking logic of the platform (Srnicek 2017).

This convergence constitutes a genuine epistemological and cultural crisis for the future of game development as a vibrant, critical, and sustainable art form. If the dominant means of production inherently discipline creators toward standardization and instrumentalization, the conceptual and aesthetic space for transformative, critical, and truly experimental play—the kind that challenges conventions and expands the medium's very possibilities—radically shrinks (Flanagan 2009). The question is no longer merely what games are made, but what kinds of games can be imagined within these structurally constrained environments. The future of play is being pre-emptively narrowed by the very architectures ostensibly meant to enable it.

The answer to this crisis must lie in a conscious, collective, and politically aware effort to reclaim the infinite game. This is not a naive, Luddite call to abandon modern tools, which is impractical, but a strategic call to develop a robust critical technical practice (Agre 1997) and a new production literacy. This literacy would allow developers to use these tools without being wholly used by them, fostering a relationship of critical appropriation rather than subservient dependency. We must cultivate what Coudry and Mejias (2019) term "data refusal" within the specific context of game creation—a conscious resistance to the totalizing datafication of the creative process. This project of reclamation involves several interconnected, praxis-oriented strategies.

Championing Critical Tools and Open Platforms as Acts of Resistance

The active support for and development of open-source engines like Godot, LÖVE, or deeply moddable legacy engines like GZDoom must be understood not merely as a technical preference, but as a direct political and aesthetic challenge to the platform model. These ecosystems are architecturally and philosophically distinct; they are not driven by the same extractive imperative to lock in users and monetize their every interaction (Srnicek 2017). Their development roadmaps are typically set by transparent community needs and a shared vision for a robust, accessible toolset, rather than by the fiduciary duty to generate perpetual quarterly growth for shareholders. Choosing to use Godot, therefore, is not just a technical choice; it is a statement against the enclosure of the creative commons and a positive vote for a future where the toolchain itself is a collaborative, infinite game (Carse 1986). This praxis aligns with a long history of feminist and participatory design that explicitly seeks to build technology that serves human ends and fosters agency, rather than submitting to capitalist imperatives of control and extraction (Bardzell 2010). It is a material instantiation of what Sennett (2008) calls the "craftsman's" sustained commitment to a domain, as opposed to the platform worker's alienated labor.

Cultivating a Literacy of Resistance and Subversive Affordances

Pedagogical institutions—from universities and online communities to workplaces—must move beyond teaching mere software proficiency to include a critical technical literacy. This literacy would enable developers to recognize the embedded political and economic logics of their tools, to "read" an asset store not just as a convenience but as an apparatus of deskilling that facilitates proletarianization (Stiegler 2010), and to "read" an analytics dashboard not as objective truth but as an instrument of behavioral modification that embodies instrumentarian power (Zuboff 2019). Armed with this literacy, developers can consciously choose to "play the infinite game" within the finite-game systems, engaging in acts of subversion and re-appropriation. This could manifest as several concrete practices:

- **Strategic Tool Use:** Deliberately leveraging powerful, industry-standard engines like Unity or Unreal for their rendering capabilities while consciously minimizing Asset Store reliance. This is a practice of reclaiming technical and artistic *savoir-faire*, of engaging in the "struggle" and "risk-taking" that Sennett (2008) identifies as essential to craftsmanship, thereby resisting the deskilling impulse of modular Taylorism.
- **Adversarial AI Collaboration:** Using generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT, Midjourney) not as an automated content generator, but as a "sparring partner" for brainstorming—a system whose suggestions are always critically evaluated, heavily modified, and subverted, rather than accepted as finished assets. This maintains the human author as the central creative agent, using the AI as a tool for thought rather than a replacement for it, thus countering the proletarianization of imagination.
- **Procedural Parrhesia:** Engaging in what we might term procedural parrhesia—a fearless speaking of truth through the materiality of code and game design. This involves deliberately designing mechanics and systems that resist datafication and simplistic metricization. Concrete examples include games like *Pathologic 2* (Ice-Pick Lodge 2019), where failure and frustration are core to the thematic experience and thus resist optimization for "player retention," or *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015), which creates an experience largely illegible to conventional analytics by subverting traditional game loops. This is a direct design-level refusal of the "behavioral surplus" extraction paradigm (Zuboff 2019). This is a direct design-level refusal of the "behavioral surplus" extraction paradigm.

Re-valuing the "Inefficient" Pleasures and the Aesthetics of Struggle

As a field, we must actively and vocally champion the aesthetic, cultural, and personal value of the struggle, the imperfect, the hand-crafted, and the deliberately non-optimized. The broader game development community—from critics and awards committees to players and journalists—needs to celebrate games that are fascinating, "noble failures," not just efficiently polished commercial successes. We must create and protect discursive and practical spaces that explicitly nurture the infinite-game pleasures of exploration and knowledge-building (Carse 1986). Initiatives such as game jams with constraints that forbid asset store use, mandate bespoke art, or prohibit analytics function as vital protected zones—what Flanagan (2009) might call sites for "critical play"—where the logic of the platform is temporarily suspended, and the intrinsic pleasures of making can be rediscovered and strengthened. This is a

collective argument for what Sennett (2008, 9) elaborates as the "craftsman's" core ethic: that the "value of work is inherent in the process of doing it well for its own sake," a stance that presents a stark contrast to the instrumental, outcome-obsessed logic of the platform.

THEORIZING AND EMBODYING INFINITE PLAY AS A PRODUCTION METHODOLOGY

Finally, the concept of the infinite game must be adopted not just as a critical lens but as a positive, actionable design and production methodology. We must speculate on the material and social organization of a development studio that explicitly organizes itself as an infinite game (Carse 1986). This would entail a fundamental reorientation of its core operational principles:

- **Prioritizing Metis over Techne:** The studio would prioritize the long-term health, creativity, and accumulated practical knowledge (*métis*) of its team over the finite victory of a quarterly earnings report. It would understand that its most valuable asset is the cultivated *savoir-faire* of its people, which Stiegler (2010) warns is eroded by proletarianization, and would structure work to protect and enhance this knowledge.
- **Projects as Evolving Explorations:** It would structure projects not as rigid, Gantt-charted marches toward a fixed, shippable product, but as ongoing, evolving explorations of a core aesthetic or interactive premise. These explorations might be released in iterative, open-ended versions, reflecting an infinite game's purpose of continuing play rather than reaching a terminal conclusion.
- **Communities as Co-creators:** It would value player communities as genuine co-creators in an ongoing cultural conversation, rather than primarily as sources of behavioral surplus to be mined or monetization targets to be optimized (Zuboff 2019). This shifts the relationship from instrumental extraction to dialogic collaboration.
- **Pluralistic Success Metrics:** It would measure success not solely by finite-game metrics like sales or daily active users, but by a more pluralistic set of values: the depth of the creative challenges overcome, the novelty of the new design patterns discovered, and, crucially, the long-term sustenance and vitality of the studio's own creative culture over time. This embodies an infinite-game mindset, where the goal is the continuation and enrichment of the practice itself.

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this paper reveals a systemic and fundamental re-engineering of creative pleasure, a shift that is not a minor trend but a seismic change in the epistemological foundation of game creation. By examining the Unity Engine and *AI Dungeon* through the fused lenses of Carse's infinite/finite games, Stiegler's proletarianization, Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry, and the political economy of Srnicek and Zuboff, we have traced how the open-ended poiesis of making is threatened by a closed loop of prediction and control. The Unity Asset Store enacts a modular Taylorism that deskills developers and fosters a homogenized "pseudo-individuality," while its analytics suite replaces design intuition with the quantified authority of behavioral data. This trajectory finds its logical, and most alarming, endpoint in AI-driven tools like *AI Dungeon*, which proletarianize

imagination itself, reducing the infinite game of storytelling to the finite game of prompt-engineering for data extraction.

It is important to qualify that this analysis focuses on a dominant, hegemonic trend within commercial and platform-dependent development, rather than claiming it represents the entirety of game-making practice. The vibrant existence of indie scenes, art-game movements, and open-source toolchains demonstrates that alternative practices persist. However, the structural power of the platforms we analyze exerts a gravitational pull that makes these alternatives increasingly difficult to sustain, rendering their defense a critical necessity.

To ensure that the future of play remains transformative, sustainable, and genuinely playful, we must become vigilant critics of our tools and ardent defenders of the open-ended, knowledge-building, infinite pleasure of creation itself. This is not a passive endeavor but requires an active movement that intertwines technical innovation, critical theory, and pedagogical reform. It demands that we champion open platforms not merely as technical alternatives but as political acts of resistance against enclosure. It requires that we cultivate a literacy of resistance, empowering developers to subvert the finite-game logics embedded in their tools. And it calls for a collective re-valuation of the "inefficient" struggles and hand-crafted imperfections that constitute the soul of creative practice. The game for the soul of our medium is indeed afoot. Its continuation, in the face of powerful forces seeking to bring it to a profitable and standardized conclusion, is our most pressing and vital task. The infinite game of creation must be defended, not merely for the future of games, but for the future of creative culture itself.

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