

# Culture as (Extra)ordinary: Authentic Representation of Working-Class Experience in *Still Wakes the Deep*

**Robin JS Sloan**

Department of Games and Arts

Abertay University

Dundee, UK

[r.sloan@abertay.ac.uk](mailto:r.sloan@abertay.ac.uk)

## ABSTRACT

Scholarship has considered representations of working-class experience in games. However, there is a need for ongoing analysis of how games afford accounts of working-class culture as a whole way of life. This paper contributes to this discussion through an analysis of *Still Wakes the Deep*. Set on an oil rig off the coast of Scotland in 1975, *Still Wakes the Deep* is notable for its representation of ordinary working-class lives, which developer paratexts frame as authentic. Simultaneously, it engages with a fantastical application of survival horror. Characters in the game are not only entwined with the cultural specificities of their class, but also subject to the influence of survival horror ludic and aesthetic conventions. This paper explores how the game balances representation of working-class culture-as-ordinary with the extraordinary qualities of survival horror. By extension, this paper asks what it means to produce an authentic representation of working-class experience in games.

## Keywords

Working-class, culture as ordinary, authenticity, representation, survival horror

## INTRODUCTION

The representation of working-class experience in media has been foundational to cultural studies, particularly as applied to analysis of literature, television, and film. Key texts by Hoggart (1957), Williams (1958), Thompson (1963), and Hall and Jefferson (1976) have invited ongoing interrogations of culture and media that consider dominance and systems of power within society. How class experiences are represented and interpreted in media remains a major area of scholarship. For example, Lawler (2014) and Loveday (2014) have argued that nostalgia modes of representation can signify working-class identities as valueless or in decline. Conversely, nostalgic recreations of the past have been considered for the ways in which they can mobilise contemporary senses of place, people, and heritage (Mahoney, 2022). Day et al. (2020) describe moralising discourses that individualise

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inequality, while Hesmondhalgh (2017) considers media failures to achieve authentic representations of working-class experiences as tied to inequitable access to the tools of production. Reality television has been a particularly important site for analysis, with studies exploring how concepts such as individualist self-improvement (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2019) class shaming (Reifová, 2021) and hyperbole (Wood, 2017) can reveal television's neoliberal ideology in relation to class.

By comparison, how digital games engage with the representation of working-class experience is relatively understudied. In the next section, I discuss games scholarship that has driven a growing interest in class representations. One important question that emerges from this reading is how *authentic* accounts of working-class culture can be successfully incorporated into game design. Indeed, what it even means to define class representation *as* authentic requires some consideration. Williams (1958) discusses culture as a 'whole way of life': that culture should be understood as 'ordinary', shaped by daily life and shared contexts. Through this we may begin to reveal tendencies and rhythms of working-class life that accumulate as a definition of authenticity. However, digital games frequently employ narrative and ludic strategies that are contingent upon the *extraordinary*: on the empowerment of the player, on forms of gameplay challenge that are incongruent with daily life, and on the introduction of fantastical mechanics, premises, settings, events, and trials. While grounded games exist, and fantastical games that embed working-class heroes have been the subject of analysis, there are evident tensions in relation to how ordinary working-class cultures can be represented in equilibrium with the extraordinary conventions of popular game genres.

The aim of this paper is to consider how the first-person survival horror game *Still Wakes the Deep* (The Chinese Room, 2024a) engages with ordinary, working-class experience while balancing this with implementation of the extraordinary. Set in 1975 on an oil rig off the coast of Scotland, *Still Wakes the Deep* foregrounds working-class characters, their conditions, and their social and cultural relations. The player adopts the first-person perspective of Glaswegian electrician Caz, through whom they can experience a grounded portrayal of working-class life that is exemplified by his manual skills, his voice and conversation with other characters, and the focus on his social conflicts and anxieties. The mixed-skill workforce, managerial structures, and confined and interconnected work and living spaces of an oil rig afford scenarios through which class relations can be explored. And yet, it could be argued that the player experience of *Still Wakes the Deep* is primarily linked to its presentation as a Lovecraftian survival horror game, rather than a game about the material conditions and social relations of the working-class. For these reasons, *Still Wakes the Deep* makes for an interesting case study in cultural representation of class in digital games, and for an exploration of what it means for any such experience to be presented and interpreted as 'authentic'.

## **GAMES, LABOUR, AND CLASS**

### **Social Realism and Agency**

Contributions to the intersection of games, labour, and class often consider the interinfluence of player agency and representations of lived experience. However, for Galloway (2006), agency and action can be interpreted as taking precedence. Galloway argues that social realism in games is underpinned by gameplay systems and rules that model the lived experience of players, encompassing everyday life, work,

and politics. For Galloway a digital game can be described as a form of social realism when it captures and simulates real-world social struggles, oppression, and inequalities. The bracketing of representational realism to privilege action as the vehicle for social realism in games has since been queried by Tvorun-Dunn (2022) who argues more for congruence between procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007) and visual rhetoric. Taken further, and in opposition to Galloway's perspective, Anable has called for more consideration to be given to the affective experience of game play informed by subjectivity and identity, which is "formed both socially and materially across both bodies and objects" (2018, p.56).

Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter (2009) raise additional issues with the realism of class representation in games. In reference to the *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) series, they argue that working-class protagonists with precarious conditions are often introduced, but that the games then sidestep any attempt to embed resistance to neoliberalism or oppression. Instead, characters in the GTA series are presented as ruthless (and predominantly criminal) entrepreneurs. Woodcock (2019) provides related analysis of how the lived experience of social conditions is represented in games, calling for alignment between player agency and the ideas being represented. This position is applied to games that characterise the lived experience of labour under capitalism, for example how games by Molleindustria can "allow the player to explore the themes of alienation, estrangement, and refusal" (Woodcock, 2019, p.142) not only through representations, but also through limited agency and mechanics. Bailes (2019) applies a similar framing to how virtual cities in games can structure space, time, and player agency in ways that can convey different subjectivities under neoliberalism. Drawing on case studies of four open-world city-based games, Bailes argues that configuration of player agency within these cities can lead to readings that articulate cultural experience as hedonistic, cynically self-interested, escapist-defeatist, or reformist. This links with Cassar's (2013) argument that the interoperation of agency and representation in games can both support hegemonic perspectives on class, but also serve to incite players to question and confront the status quo.

For the current study, I adopt a position which is sensitive to the totality of the game experience, privileging neither action nor representation, but considering them in relation and in how they operate to communicate ideas of social realism.

## **Representation and Simulation of Labour**

Labour performance and material conditions are common themes in research into working-class representation in games. In many cases, studies proceed from the nature and type of labour being depicted, to trace what implications emerge from labour-specific play. Iantorno et al. (2021) looked at eight games that feature jobs such as taxi driver, janitor, bartender, and firefighter. They observed that few games let players take on working-class roles, but those that do can explore more than just the work itself. These games can platform issues such as job insecurity, daily routines, and how placing these jobs in fantasy settings can either highlight or weaken narratives about class. DeJong and Blamey (2022) expand on this through their analysis of drink-making games, in which they identify two themes: bartending games that emphasise survival work, and mixology games that serve to romanticize working-class labour as artisanship. They conclude that precarity is typically hidden unless utilised for purposes of narrative tension, and the myths of the "coolness" of labour can mask real-world insecurities. Iantorno and Consalvo (2023) examined how socioeconomic class can be represented within character creation in CRPGs. While

attention is paid to background narratives, they again observe that it is the *types* of labour (skills and abilities) characters are associated with that are key markers for class. Working-class labour that is associated with negative stereotypes and social positioning has also been a focus for analysis, such as Dwyer's (2022) study of the depiction and humanisation of sex workers in *Watch\_Dogs 2* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2016).

Kunzelman (2022) provides a particularly useful framing for considering how real working-class labour is performed in games, from blue-collar simulator games such as *Euro Truck Simulator 2* (SCS Software, 2012) to immaterial labour games like the bartending visual novel *VA-11 HALL-A* (Sukeban Games, 2016). In the case of the former, Kunzelman identifies "a kind of affective reclaiming of the conditions of work" (p.94) under the conditions of late capitalism, where players may experience nostalgia for past economic conditions and labour and feel a sense of accomplishment through the performance of arduous, blue-collar tasks. In the latter case, Kunzelman notes that "the fantasy is that all these skills I have developed will lead me down a meaningful narrative life and bring me into contact with interesting people. My service will take me along for the ride" (p.95). Working-class labour in games can therefore be understood as self-fulfilling performative action in and of itself, or as a vehicle for narrative development. We can link this to Kristensen and Wilhelmsson (2017) and their exploration of the dialectics of work and play / games and play. As they note "the act of playing is in essence a means for the worker to cease being a worker, for a limited time, and to become, in a surrealist sense, "something else" than a slave in the bounds of the capitalist". This has implications not only for the idea of games-as-work and how this relates to play-as-freedom, but also how we approach analysis of games that are intended to represent a class experience that is inherently tied up in capitalist material conditions.

## **Expressing Working-Class Culture in Games**

From the above studies we can account for a growing body of literature speaking to the performance and representation of working-class labour in games: how it is handled ludically, how it relates to character development and narratives, how it may signify affective and social aspects of lived experience, and how ordinary work can be wrapped in fantastical settings. Beyond labour, the wider cultural context of class expression and experience is also covered in related research. Ivănescu (2018) provides an analysis of *Beneath a Steel Sky* (Revolution Software, 1994) that demonstrates not only how games can connect with the cultural specificity and material conditions of class experience (in this case, the impact of Thatcherism in the United Kingdom, while encompassing British humour, accents, and themes), but also how aesthetic choices such as music can reflect and reinforce class difference. Litherland's (2021) reminds us of the importance of considering classed experience of games, not only class representation *in* games, by introducing the concept of 'ludosity', defined as the sensations, emotions, and physiological experiences of games. This echoes Shaw's (2010) earlier work in connecting cultural studies to game studies and advocating for a more reflexive engagement with how the culture of gaming is constructed.

Authentic voices and language are often considered in research into class expression in games, from the voices of sex workers in the urban environment (Dwyer, 2022) to how accents exemplify themes of class, ethnicity, and privilege (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Hejná 2023). In the latter example, the authors argue that vocal

stereotyping, when presented overtly, can serve to platform social issues, rather than re-enforce ideological views of class. This is expanded by Stein (2023) who notes not only that accents are associated with social groups and class by *audiences*, but also that these accent variations feedback into *developer* selection of voices for their games, often leading to re-enforcement of class stereotypes.

Lastly, we may consider how game-based representations of class experience can become problematised when engaged with as a form of ‘identity tourism’ (Nakamura, 2002). Consalvo and DeJong (2024) discussed and critiqued games’ capacity to operate as ‘empathy machines’ that enable players to experience the reality of working-class lives, noting how agency problematises our reading of choice and power in relation to class. When agency is limited, this can frustrate players; yet when agency and choice is afforded to the player, this can lead to gaming the system for optimal outcomes. Nevertheless, games also offer potential for counter-hegemonic expression on the part of developers, as well as in the interpretation of players. Examining games published during the 2009-2015 recession as being constructive of the social imaginary of the period, Pérez-Latorre et al. (2019) cite games such as *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) and *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive, 2018) as having “metaphorical resonances of hardship”.

## ANALYSIS

The current study applied Fernández-Vara (2024) to guide analysis of *Still Wakes the Deep*, integrating a directed formal and textual analysis of the game with consideration of relevant contextual materials (paratexts such as developer videos and interviews). My approach to interpreting the game was further informed by Bogost’s *Unit Operations* (2006), which offers an object-oriented ontological framework for analysing meaning in computational media. According to Bogost, meaning in digital games emerges not through linear narrative structures but rather through the assemblages of discrete ‘units’ of meaning (e.g. mechanics, rules, interfaces, characters, events, objects etc.). Each unit can and should be read individually, but it is also productive to consider the units relationally through their configurative logic. Identifying and considering individual units, in addition to how these units encounter one another, aided my interpretation of how *Still Wakes the Deep* produces an account of ordinary working-class culture in an extraordinary setting while maintaining a coherence of authenticity. On authenticity, my analysis was also in conversation with Wright’s (2022) study of historical authenticity in games, particularly how developer positioning of their games through paratexts can construct self-proclaimed authenticity in their own terms.

Overarching all the above was my theoretical framing grounded in Williams’ (1958) contributions to the understanding of culture, which I apply to my interpretation of how *Still Wakes the Deep* produces an embodied, affective, and socially patterned account of working-class experience. Williams provides a vocabulary for understanding class not as sociological category, but as a ‘whole way of life’ expressed in language, custom, and relation. Set at the start of Scotland’s oil boom with the emergence of Thatcherite neoliberalism on the horizon, the game is clearly subject to a reading that engages with Williams’ structure of feeling, which can be recognised and unpacked retroactively. Most prominently, I engaged with Williams concept of working-class culture as collectivist and cooperative, perhaps best summarised when he states “what is properly meant by ‘working-class culture’... is not proletarian art,

or council houses, or a particular use of language; it is, rather, the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought, and intentions which proceed from this" (1958, p.428). While Williams provides a theoretical lens for cultural analysis sensitive to time and place, my approach to reading *Still Wakes the Deep* was also concerned with how the game is productive of working-class meaning-making in the contemporary context of its release. To that end, I leant on the accounts of poverty and working-class conditions in modern Britain by Scottish social commentator and author Darren McGarvey (2018, 2022) to aid my reading of the characters, events, and structures of *Still Wakes the Deep*. Texturally rich accounts by McGarvey also supported development of the concept of a working-class authenticity.

### Labour and the Workplace as Ordinary

By embodying the role of an electrician, we might anticipate that the player of *Still Wakes the Deep* will engage with performative labour that is task-oriented and completionist. To a degree this is true with Caz: we perform manual skills to repair or operate machinery, such as replacing fuses, pulling levers, or removing screws (Figure 1, left). However, these interactions do not align with the aestheticised labour representations of simulation games. There is no satisfying completionist aesthetic at play (Kunzelman, 2022). Instead, DeJong and Blamey's (2022) analysis of bartending games as featuring menial and repetitive labour has more relevance. The performing of labour in *Still Wakes the Deep* is at best a necessary activity, rather than an action that produces meaningful affect or reflection. Further, the labour actions Caz performs are mirrored in the player's embodied execution of these tasks, which are also performatively mundane (directed button presses, joystick moves etc.)

If labour performance is one unit within the game's system of authentic working-class experience, it communicates the reality of the tasks as routine. Indeed, direct manual interaction with the world is central to the game. Although the player can jump and run in action scenarios, many of the key moments of drama involve clinging to ladders, gantries, or gangways (Figure 1, right). Caz's hands are the primary site of material contact with the world around him, accentuated by adopting a first-person view of this subject-world interface. This tactility of experience is also echoed in game paratexts, such as the Project Creative Director's view that Caz had to feel physically connected to the rig (Hordon, 2024).



**Figure 1:** Use of hands to exercise interaction with the world: manual labour (left) and hanging on to a platform (right)

Caz's subjectivity is integrated into the broader conditions of working-class experience discussed by McGarvey and cultural materialist relations between subjects as per Williams. This manifests in how the player is directed in their tasks, from performing electrical jobs to completing dogsbody errands that involve movement around the rig. We can identify this in multiple categories of the gameworld interface (Jørgensen, 2013), from direct instructions in the overlaid UI to the verbal instructions from colleagues or superiors. Not only does this position Caz on the bottom rung of a hierarchy and network of relations, but it also serves to produce different types of social relation and sites of affect that speak to daily life under working-class conditions. Instructions from other workers (fellow electricians, but also other working professions such as engineers) can signify collectivist and cooperative intents, embodying Williams' articulation of working-class tendencies. Alternatively, managerial task setting is positioned as explicitly hierarchical and traces divisions of class.

Another evident representation of working-class experience through labour is in the replication of an industrial workplace. On one level, this is conveyed through the materiality of labour in an industrial setting: through machinery, piping, containers, or workplace signage. Associate Art Director, Laura Dodds (Table 1), offers insight into how the design pillars of the art team grappled with the concept of personal environmental authenticity. Dodds goes on to connect these pillars to the extensive research the art team conducted into historical materials and documentary evidence of oil rigs. Drawing on archive photography as well as original photography of industrial sites and materials, the art team curated an environment that exhibited the rhythms, texture, and atmosphere of industrial labour. This representation of material labour through setting can be considered a further unit in the game's system of meaning, whilst also positioning a developer understanding of authenticity as being grounded in rigorous environmental research.

However, these design pillars were not limited to accurate depictions of tools, technologies, and industrial materials. Geographic, temporal, and social dimensions of worldbuilding were also key, as explained by Project Creative Director, John McCormack (see Table 2). Williams' structure of feeling clearly applies to the McCormack's take on worldbuilding, highlighting the goal of representing the collective consciousness of 1970s British working-class culture. Stills from the developer video shown in Figure 2 illuminate this through the referencing of contemporary popular culture (working-class characters popularly performed on 1970s television, top left), moodboards of products, marketing, sports, and home photography (top right), detailed notes that guided the art team to refer to the lifestyles and documentary evidence of real individuals and settings (bottom left), and work-in-progress art production bringing this all together in the workplace setting (bottom right). Throughout the workplace setting we encounter myriad cues to the structure of feeling at this point in British and Scottish working-class experience, extending from the personal, social, and economic into the political concerns of the time. For instance, the set dressing alludes to calls for unionisation in the face of poor working conditions and incorporates competing symbols of British unionism and Scottish nationalism.

Developer	Role	Commentary
Laura Dodds	Associate Art Director	"On <i>Still Wakes the Deep</i> we had three core art direction pillars. So the first was 'making it personal', the second was 'authenticity' and the third was 'a terrible beauty'. We did a lot of research. I mean, before starting this project, I had no idea about how oil rigs worked, what they looked like, what the experience of living on one would be. We were really lucky because there was a lot of archive footage from the 1970s on oil rigs."

**Table 1:** Developer commentary (The Chinese Room, 2024c)

Developer	Role	Commentary
John McCormack	Project Creative Director	"Oil rigs, or any kind of machinery, or any kind of you know, someone's living room or how they dressed... in America in 1975, or in you know Eastern Europe in 1975, is incredibly different. If you lived in 1975 all the stuff you had would have been from the 60s, so you have to look earlier. Authenticity was the number one driving factor behind every decision"

**Table 2:** Developer commentary (The Chinese Room, 2023)



**Figure 2:** Stills from developer video (The Chinese Room, 2024b) evidence the world building process.

Unit	Description
<i>Performative manual labour</i>	Labour that is expressed through mechanics as repetitive and mundane.
<i>Subject-world interface</i>	Hands and manual interaction as the prevalent interface between subject and world.
<i>Hierarchies of knowledge and command</i>	Existing within a ludic and narrative hierarchy of skilled knowledge and directed instruction, exercised through the gameworld interface.
<i>Material environment</i>	Narrative and aesthetic representations of the materiality of industrial workplaces.
<i>Political and economic discourses</i>	Embedding in the gameworld symbols of wider discourses linked to the experience of labour, e.g. unionisation, national identity.

**Table 3:** Units that combine to communicate experience of labour and working conditions in *Still Wakes the Deep*.

As a representation of working-class labour, then, *Still Wakes the Deep* constructs a system of meaning through the configuration of several distinct units, proposed above in Table 3. While direct labour performance is a unit of analysis at play, the whole way of life with respect to working-class labour emerges through the assemblage of unit relations that feedback into the performative labour and colour how we interpret the simulation, representation, and lived experience of labour in the game.

### **Voice, Class, and Community**

Although a game ostensibly about a protagonist who fulfils a working-class job in a materially and culturally ‘authentic’ workplace, developer positioning of authenticity in the game is arguably more concerned with how it emerges through an intimacy of voice, rather than accurate representation of labour. As evident from developer paratexts, accent was a major focus for framing an authenticity of cultural representation. While Caz is Glaswegian, and many of the characters are from various working-class communities in Scotland, the developers understood a need to address the marginalisation of British accents in games more broadly while also representing the social and economic realities of industrial labour. Project Creative Director, John McCormack, reflects that British accents in games can typically be boiled down to “your cockney, your country bumpkin and the officer-class gentleman”, while *Still Wakes the Deep* features voices from “Isle of Skye, Dundee, Aberdeen and Glasgow, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Burnley and Belfast” (McCormack, in Phillips, 2023). We can link this back to problems of class stereotyping by accent (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Hejná 2023; Stein 2023). Accent and its acted performance can therefore be considered a unit in the game’s system of authenticity. However, some of the language use in *Still Wakes the Deep* can be read as problematically stereotypical, with the excessive and often comedic swearing associated with Scots characters bordering

Developer	Role	Commentary
John McCormack	Project Creative Director	“The characters are rounded and three-dimensional, and they they're not just action heroes playing out a part and the characters aren't just background characters. As I said like these are these are workmates, these are crew members that are isolated on this rig. When people explore the environment and talk to these characters, it feels like they've had lives before they were on the rig, and you got a sense of who they were.”
Rob McLachlan	Lead Designer	“We made sure that every person we put in the rig, everybody, every person you talk to has a biography. So when the player plays the game they can feel connection as much as possible even to someone they only see at a glance.”
Damian Goodwin	Voice Director	“I mean it's a really engaging and truthful journey, and you know someone like Alec Newman, for example, playing that role, I mean he's been phenomenal. He's already an actor of fantastic instinct, but he brings a real authenticity and truth to his reads.”

**Table 4:** Developer commentary (The Chinese Room, 2024b)

on the parodic. And from Williams, we can understand that language use alone is not the way to understand class culture, but rather it is what proceeds from the language use (in terms of manners, habits, thoughts) that express the whole way of life.

For the developers, this richness of experience was established through the depth of character backstories, as highlighted in Table 4. To ground characters as working-class, it was important that their ordinary lives *beyond the workplace* were considered in detail. Consequently, character engagements centre on their social, cultural, and familial relations, more so than the practical realities of their labour. This includes the player character Caz, whose Glaswegian voice is arguably less a symbol of his classed experience than the situating of him as a family man. The game opens with waves crashing against the industrial structure of the oil rig, and depicts Caz sat in his quarters. However, it is neither the setting nor the labour-role of the protagonist that is the focus to this introduction, but rather the voice, emotion, and struggles of Caz's wife, Suze, expressed in a letter to Caz:

**SUZE:** *I still cannae believe you went. What were you thinking? Going to that place? I wish you hadn't got yourself into this mess, but you did. And you cannae run forever. I know you were just trying to do right by me, so I need... you to do what's right by us now. Please, Caz. I am so... tired of fighting. I just want it to be over. I want you home, the girls want you home, but... If you don't deal with this, then we're done for good. I love you, but I won't wait forever. Suze. PS the girls made you a Christmas card.*

Beyond backstory, dialogue exchanges and vocal performance in the present is used to foreground culture as ordinary through the expression of habits of thought and the rhythms of daily life. This is something we can observe in how Caz interacts with work colleagues. Notable exchanges focus on leisure time outside of work, on jokes at each other's expense, on cultural practices like the football teams characters support, and on political views. An example exchange with Caz's best friend and rig chef, Roy, fleshes out individual experiences, rapidly moving from lived experience of health to popular culture references:

**ROY:** Caz, mate, I'm not gonna make it over the deck, I'm not feeling so good pal... I think I need my insulin.

**CAZ:** What? You're fucking kidding Roy, now?

**ROY:** Oh I'm sorry to inconvenience you Mr bloody fit and healthy. I'll tell you what, I'll have a little chat with my pancreas, shall I? And tell it to pull its socks up.

**CAZ:** Alright, alright, fucks sake. Could you no just eat some fucking jam or something?

**ROY:** Oh bloody hell, the man's a medical genius! I'll get on the blower to Doctor fucking Spock and tell him not to panic. We've solved diabetes here!

**CAZ:** It's fucking McCoy, not Spock.

Embodying everyday struggles, relations, tensions, and humour, exchanges like these can be considered units that encode class experience and authenticity of ordinary life. Further, the use of voice and vocal performance in the game can be read as reflecting structural relations. On the one hand, performances encode the collectivist ideology of Williams working class culture, which we see in how workmates express unity, solidarity, sympathy, and positive affect in their exchanges. On the other, dialogue and vocal performances signify hierarchies of relations that speak to McGarvey's account of class distinctions. Consider the speech depicted in Figure 3, where two non-playable characters engage with Caz to direct the player where to go. On the left, work colleague Banky offers apologies and solidarity when forced to tell Caz he will have to take a longer route. On the right, rig manager and antagonist Rennick's speech is dominating, directorial, and aggressive.



**Figure 3:** Speech patterns can encode attitudes of community and of division. Work colleague Banky exhibits positive affect and solidarity. Manager and antagonist Rennick exhibits disdain when issuing orders.

Sticking with the character Rennick to examine this further, the following exchange between Caz and Rennick illustrates how structural prejudices and domination are embedded within voice:

**RENNICK:** So glad you can join me, and sorry to have got you out of bed. Shut the door and have a seat.  
**CAZ:** I'm fine stand-  
**RENNICK:** Sit your erse in that chair you fucking liability.  
**CAZ:** But I don't-  
**RENNICK:** I run a tight ship. Do you understand me? A tight ship.  
**CAZ:** Technically it's no a ship-  
**RENNICK:** Shut your gob you ned prick!

Tonally, Rennick is aggressive and mocking of Caz. The implication of fecklessness chimes with the literature that discusses problematic connotations of the working class (e.g. Day et al. 2020). The imposition of social dominance, the reinforcement of control, and use of pejorative terms such as 'ned' (a Scots word that can be regarded as synonymous with 'yob' or the broader English word 'chav') align with accounts of structural inequities and cultural stereotyping of the working-class as discussed by McGarvey (2022) and Jones (2011).

In addition to units of authenticity linked to labour, we can therefore propose a series of units of meaning that emerge from the voices of characters (Table 5). The accents of characters, particularly the use of Scots dialect and swearing, is prominent in developer framing of authenticity. However, as this analysis reveals, we must unpack vocal performance into several units that operate within this overall system of authenticity, inclusive of units of backstory, units that encode everyday experience of class culture, and units that encode structures and hierarchies of social relations. While accent is offered by paratexts as the predominant symbol of authenticity, we can see that it is in fact the relation between these units of voice that produce a more rounded sense of everyday working-class culture, one which aligns with lived accounts such as those by McGarvey.

Unit	Description
<i>Dialect and accent</i>	Speech as a marker of class authenticity.
<i>Backstory</i>	Characters are imbued with life stories that connect them to relations and experiences outside the workplace.
<i>Everyday experience</i>	Patterns of lived working-class cultural experience articulated through speech and tone.
<i>Structures of community and division</i>	Collectivism and shared experiences vs inequity, prejudice and social exclusion articulated through speech.

**Table 5:** Units that exemplify working-class experience through voice and social relations *Still Wakes the Deep*.

## Survival Horror and Working-Class Culture as Extraordinary

The above sections explored how *Still Wakes the Deep* presents working-class culture as ordinary. But, as a survival horror game, *Still Wakes the Deep* deals predominantly in representations and player actions that are *extraordinary*. If developer positioning (and audience reception) emphasises authenticity of lived class experience, how can these apparent oppositions be reconciled?

Aesthetically, survival horror can be considered in terms of its manipulation of perception (Kirkland, 2009), representation of corruption (Reed, 2016), and the horror that emerges from participation (Christopher and Leuszler, 2022). However, the contributions of Boonen and Miertiz (2018) and Steinmetz (2018) provide valuable conceptual tools for the present analysis. Boonen and Mieritz discuss how survival horror operates based on an oscillation between agency and constraint. Going further, Steinmetz (2018) offers an analysis of the *Silent Hill* series as carceral horror, exploring themes of retribution and confinement. Cultural anxieties around loss of autonomy, surveillance, and punishment are reflected in how *Silent Hill* games imprison and confine the player. These concepts can be linked to themes of working-class social and material conditions, particularly those articulated by McGarvey (2018, 2022) in terms of how working-class communities are subject to environments of stress, trauma, lack of safety, policing, and social invisibility.

It is notable that *Still Wakes the Deep* spends little time representing culturally ordinary work conditions, descending into disaster and then paranormal horror very early in the game. To that end, how the game maintains a resemblance of the *ordinary* in a horror context is an important unit for analysis. This is in part achieved through recognition of how the ordinary sites and conditions of working-class industrial labour convey threat and fear. As summarised by Lead Environment Artist, Gillespie (Table 6), the oil rig setting lends itself very well to horror. The sea is presented as menacing and treacherous even before it is connected to paranormal threats. Heavy machinery and containers are in motion, narrow gangways provide limited protection against the elements, and sparks, heat, and gas emit from the environment around the player. As disaster unfolds, the real threats of this everyday working environment accelerate through chains and supports buckling, modules falling from the rig, and characters being pushed overboard. These are everyday risks, linked to the lived realities of working-class labour.

Developer	Role	Commentary
Iain Gillespie	Lead Environment Artist	“An oil rig is a kind of scary place anyway. The interiors are claustrophobic and hot, they're steamy, they're dark. With the exteriors, you're outside, against the elements with the North Sea there, a crazy storm... So, yeah, I mean, we didn't really have to do too many tricks, just imagine what it's like to be on an oil rig. And that's even before things get weird.”

**Table 6:** Developer commentary (The Chinese Room, 2024c)

If everyday risk is a unit concerning practical fear linked to ordinary conditions, we might distinguish this from the game's everyday horrors conveyed through Lovecraftian aesthetics and survival horror conventions. By everyday horror, I mean that *Still Wakes the Deep* maintains its connection with everyday experience even when it confronts us with the supernatural, grotesque, and monstrous. Characters who succumb to the supernatural corruption may transform into monsters, but they continue to vocalise in the dialects and tone of their original selves. It is clearly important that we understand that these remain 'real' people, with real voices, but who have been dropped into the extraordinary horror of a workplace nightmare. For example, in one of the early horror encounters with a colleague-turned-adversary, the disfigured Gibbo continues to scream in his accent as he descends into insanity. He pursues Caz through their enclosed work environment, with Caz attempting to exercise solidarity and empathy for his fallen comrade. Perhaps the most notable characterisation of everyday horror is the recurring pursuit of Caz by the corrupted Rennick. The former manager, now a deformed entity, assumes the role of a stalking, all-powerful monster. The hierarchy of the work relationship and the power that Rennick exercised over Caz earlier in the game is now mapped directly to the hierarchy of monster and defenceless protagonist. The aesthetic and ludic properties of survival horror therefore serve to accentuate the everyday through exaggeration of affect and of conditions.

Lastly, agency in survival horror emerges as a key site of working-class meaning-making, with the disempowerment of the player serving to allegorise the lack of societal agency articulated in McGarvey (2018, 2022). We may consider agency from two perspectives: spatial agency, and temporal agency.

Spatially, we can see the connections with *Silent Hill's* incarceration (Steinmetz, 2018). Caz's agency and movement in space are highly constrained. In the early phases of the game, the representative space of the rig (and its hierarchy of labour and management relations) explains Caz's lack of agency in spatial movement. As the game descends into supernatural horror, the confinement accelerates. Doors remain locked, but increasingly it is damage to the rig that further constrains movement options, or paranormal appendages that deny Caz freedom to access exits, to choose routes, or even to act (Figure 4). The constraint of spatial agency inherent in survival horror serves allegorical ends, in that working-class experience can be similarly



**Figure 4:** Example of constrained spatial agency accentuated by the aesthetics of survival horror

constrained in its spatial and structural agency. Caz has no powers of privilege or capital to escape his conditions and assert agency in space. Indeed, the only influence he has is his ability to revert to his hands: to use his tools to find escape routes or somewhere to hide. Even then, the outcome of this activity has no real consequence on spatial agency.

Limits on temporal agency also present as a unit of analysis. We are presented with temporal structures (a frequent oscillation between past and present) that dictate (and constrain) the player's agency. When thrust into the past, the player has no agency whatsoever. Scenes in the past are represented as memories of working-class experience as a whole way of life: of relationships and of decisions that cannot be remade or repaired. The player has some spatial agency when brought back into the forever-present of the workplace; they can perform labour, experience work-based relations, and fight for survival. But ultimately there is no escape from the present, and no agency over the future.

The developers note that the final act of the game is constructed and programmed as a rhythmic clock that forces the Lovercraftian entity and rig environment to move in sync (McEvoy, 2024). This is a countdown to a final choice that the player is presented as being forced to make. However, that final choice is no choice at all: the player has no option but to accept the futility of resistance to the present conditions, much in line with McGarvey's accounts of futility in working-class communities. On performing the final action to destroy the entity, the rig, and himself, Caz is offered one last reprieve: a return to the memories of his past, but now with a moment of brief spatial agency. Caz's family home represents the fuller way of life of the working-class subject. And for one last time, Caz can now walk around that space. He can regard Suze's face for the first time as she sleeps in their marital bed, peruse photographs of social and familial relations, and view drawings made by his children. The game thus closes as it begins, by positioning working-class experience defined not *as* labour, but rather as a *whole way of life* that is contingent upon (and entangled with) labour as a means of survival.



**Figure 5:** Caz's family home in the closing section of the game.

As a survival horror game embracing the extraordinary, we can therefore summarise a final set of units of analysis that contribute to the game’s overall system of working class authenticity (Table 7): depictions of the everyday both in terms of the real risks of working-class experience and its accentuation through genre conventions, and constraints on agency that have allegorical dimensions linked to both agency in space and time. These units combine and interact with the units of labour and voice, collectively producing a broader and deeper sense of what makes for an authentic account of working-class experience.

Unit	Description
<i>Everyday risk</i>	Reflecting how working-class conditions present real risks to workers.
<i>Everyday horror</i>	Accentuating the everyday workplace through aesthetic and ludic exaggeration of survival horror.
<i>Constrained spatial agency</i>	Limited capacity to move through space, to make choices; Workplace as prison.
<i>Constrained temporal agency</i>	Workplace as the forever-present, the family as temporally dislodged, the future as predetermined.

**Table 7:** Units of survival horror ludic and aesthetic conventions that allegorise working-class experience in *Still Wakes the Deep*.

## CONCLUSION

**RENNICK:** All personnel need to go to their nearest evacuation point. Don’t you all get too excited, now. You’ll all be back at work in fifteen minutes, once I get all this nonsense straightened out.

**CAZ:** Fucking bastard...

Oscillating between the oppressive conditions of working-class experience as exemplified by McGarvey (2018, 2022), and the allegorical aesthetics of survival horror as discussed by Steinmetz (2018), *Still Wakes the Deep* demonstrates how the traces between the ordinary and extraordinary can reveal a deeper meaning to class authenticity. The above announcement by Rennick over the rig speakers - after Caz and the crew have already faced devastation, death, and supernatural horror in their workplace - is a notable example of how the binaries of ordinary and extraordinary can be upended. Rennick speaks in the ordinary tone and manner of a manager who exercises control over workers. His insistence that work breaks are always time-limited irrespective of context will likely be familiar to anyone with lived experience of working-class labour. And yet the player is experiencing a rollercoaster of uncanny horror. Rennick not only expresses indifference through the managerial ordinary, but also later transforms into grotesque, supernatural antagonist, allegorically pursuing the player through the deteriorating and distorted workplace.

The aim of the current study was to consider how ordinary working-class experiences are represented in *Still Wakes the Deep* while reconciling this with the extraordinary

mechanics and aesthetics of survival horror. Drawing on Williams as a theoretical lens, McGarvey for contextual accounts of conditions, and Bogost as a framework for synthesising findings, the contribution has been to identify units of working-class experience across labour, voice, and survival horror. On labour we can infer that ordinary working-class experiences are articulated through units of performative manual labour, through the player’s subject-world interface through the hands, through hierarchies of knowledge and command, through representation of the material environment, and through representations of political and economic discourses as tied to labour. The importance of voice is strongly emphasised in developer paratexts. Here, we can note that dialect and accent operate as a unit of meaning, but more importantly we see meaning emerge through how the voice is applied: in units of backstory, everyday experiences, and structures of community and division. Lastly, analysis of the extraordinary in the game identified how units of working-class meaning can be read through the ludic and aesthetic dimensions of the survival horror game, including units of everyday risks, everyday horrors, and constraints placed on both spatial and temporal agency.

When taken together, the relations between the above units can be considered as an overarching system of working-class authenticity, which incorporates (but does not rest upon) developer perspectives on what is or is not ‘authentic’. Importantly, this system collapses the binaries of ordinary and extraordinary, as relations between units reveal traces of working-class life that are heightened through allegory and exaggeration for effect. In the current study, we can consider how unit relations in *Still Wakes the Deep’s* system of working-class authenticity produces the interpretations listed in Table 8.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description</b>
<i>Resistance to stereotype</i>	Authenticity of implementation of labour, conditions, and worker backstories to produce multidimensional working-class characters.
<i>Culture as ordinary</i>	Authenticity and intimacy of voice through accent, affect, and articulation of wider social, economic, and cultural relations connected to working-class experience.
<i>Ordinary as extraordinary</i>	Authenticity emerges in the traces between ordinary and extraordinary, e.g. the industrial workplace as simultaneously ordinary site of labour and extraordinary site of control.
<i>Horror as allegory</i>	Aesthetic and ludic properties of survival horror genre appropriated to allegorise precarity, vulnerability, and lack of agency in working-class lives.

**Table 8:** Emerging themes of working-class authenticity in *Still Wakes the Deep*.

Tvorun-Dunn's (2022) response to how Galloway (2006) presents social realism in games is worth returning to here. The proposal to redefine social realism in games away from Galloway's congruence requirement - or as mimetic accuracy of social realities - towards social realism as a wider critique of social structures, opens *Still Wakes the Deep* to interpretation as a social realist game. In which case, we may read *Still Wakes the Deep* as an authentic social realist account of working-class culture as (extra)ordinary.

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