

A World to Build: World-building and Capitalism in Games

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INTRODUCTION

World-building is a term widely used within both industry and academic conversations about videogames. While there have been some important works that have considered games world-building from a media-theoretical (Wolf 2012), historical (Kocurek and Payne 2024) and textual (Ruberg 2025) perspective, its relationship to capitalism has further room for exploration. Building off the work of world-building theorists (Ekman and Taylor 2016; Hassler-Forest 2016), Marxist-influenced approaches to games studies (de Peuter and Dyer-Witford 2009; Woodcock 2019), and the Marxist tradition of political economy, this paper forwards a theory of videogame world-building that emphasises the embeddedness of game worlds in capitalist social relations. Through analysing the political-economic construction of the game worlds of *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios 2015) and *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019), I argue that world-building is not just a form of creative production, but an important part in the development and prolonging of Intellectual Property (IP) for media monopolies. From a production standpoint, world-building works through the creation of what Marx defined as “fixed capital”. For Marx, fixed capital is the portion of capital that remains fixed within the production process, only giving up a part of its value in production, in contrast to “circulating capital”, which is “completely consumed in every labour process” (p. 238). Examples of fixed capital include machines and farm animals, although the most useful metaphor for understanding game worlds is land, as franchising, legal infrastructure and the creation of IP turns the player’s relationship to the world closer to that of a rentier than a consumer (Srnicek 2021). Worlds are products of human labour and function as continual stores of value that media companies can return to and license, essentially “brands” with their own value (Arvidsson 2006). Through outlining this relationship, I present a novel way of understanding the socio-economic nature of videogame worlds.

I then turn to how this effects the aesthetics of games. Building off the work of Fredric Jameson (1991) and Anna Kornbluh (2024), I argue that this political-economic relationship leads to a form of fictional world-production that lacks any

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sense of historicity or change. If game worlds are a store of “dead labour” (Marx 1990, p. 342), it is against the capitalist’s interest to make any substantial changes to the world, as this would be a waste of the value embedded within it. Through a brief analysis of the recurring iconography of the *Fallout* franchise, I argue that this economic relationship means big-budget game worlds tend towards stasis: endless, ever-present and always-on worlds that exist without any meaningful change. Even further, this stasis expresses the “political unconscious” (Jameson 2013) of what Anna Kornbluh (2024) calls “too-late” capitalism—a society where history feels as if it has ended and the future feels increasingly foreclosed. The fixed nature of these worlds makes it harder for us to envision radical changes to the world in which we live: a reflection of “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009), the belief—to quote Thatcher—that there “there is no alternative”. While there is certainly a radical potential within these failures to envision the future, as Levitas (2013) notes, it nonetheless serves as an important representational limit within world-building’s style.

Finally, I look towards a game which resists this tendency towards stasis through a deep embedding of historicity into the gameworld: ZA/UM’s 2019 role-playing game *Disco Elysium*. Instead of a static world, I argue that the game presents the narrative period as only a single moment in a much larger totality of historical change, destabilising the importance of the game’s specific historical moment. I argue *Disco Elysium* forwards a model of historical, process-based world-building which recognizes the importance of not just the people and places that currently exist, but those in the past and the things yet to come. I finish by showing how *Disco Elysium* still succumbed to its nature as capital, through a brief discussion of the legal-financial battle over the *Elysium* IP (People Make Games 2023). I show how even those works that push against world-building’s embeddedness in capitalism are still often subsumed into capitalist logics.

Across these examinations, my paper expresses the need for a critical understanding of world-building within games and media studies. If, as Ruberg (2025) suggests, all games are worlds—and thus all games-production is really a form of world-building—then it is crucial that world-building as both a practice and rhetorical construct is better understood from textual, philosophical, historical and political-economic perspectives. Understanding worlds is necessary for understanding games, and this paper is an important and novel contribution for outlining the economics and ideologies that guide late capitalist games production, a necessary step to understanding a way out. In doing so, this paper speculates on how we can reclaim world-building as a radically utopian and fundamentally pleasurable practice, what Zigon (2017) calls an “experimentation with an otherwise” (para 9).

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