

Gaming the System: Affect, Agency, and Communicative Capitalism

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INTRODUCTION

In *Blog Theory* (2010), Jodi Dean theorizes the book as a means of resistance to communicative capitalism. The commodification of communication, she argues, encourages the circulation of fragmented opinions and affects, which not only facilitates the distribution and consumption of communication, but also safeguards communicative capitalism against critique. In a world dominated by rapid communication, Dean argues that the book functions like the tactics used by workers in labour movements in that it introduces a disruption and delays the immediate gratification sought by subjects of capitalism. The book frustrates one's desire for easily digested bits of information, it demands time and attention; for this reason, Dean wagers that "critical media theory is possible in book form" (3). However, she is not so quick to extend her theory to include electronic forms writing like e-books or blog posts; the critical affordances of the book's design are exclusive to print. Breaking from this perspective, I argue that her conditions for critical media theory are readily applied to video games, with the exception of her narrow Aristotelian definition of narrative (which she borrows from Lev Manovich). While Dean would likely challenge this application to games, game studies has much to gain from exploring the critical potential of games as a medium through this work, given its attention to commodification, affect, and participatory culture.

To illustrate the complex relationship between games and communicative capitalism, this paper examines Davey Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited, Ltd. 2015), which exemplifies the types of resistance that she describes through its critique of society's drive for validation. *The Beginner's Guide* is unusual in that it invites players to analyze a collection of unfinished games with the explicit goal of uncovering the developer's intentions and emotional state. The game later turns this objective to conflate its author and his work on its head to problematize the relationship between developers and their players.

Writing in 2006, Alexander Galloway anticipated an independent gaming movement that would realize "its true potential as a political and cultural avant-garde" (126). This movement would redefine play through radical action, a term he uses to describe practices of countergaming that, rather than attending to the aesthetics of a game, would

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redefine mechanics and algorithms to critique gameplay (125). At the time, Galloway notes that “[a]n independent gaming movement has yet to flourish” (126), but the last decade has since seen an increase in the accessibility of game engines and user-friendly game development software, which has resulted in the creation of innumerable innovative and experimental games. The independent production of games promises to be a space for exploring the aesthetic and political potential of the medium free from the constraints of market demands and player desires. While the freedom offered by independent production is questionable — as those who left somewhat stable AAA jobs to pursue independent projects have learned — it is clear that this movement has encouraged developers to push the medium into new territory. In recent years, many games have been released that explore dark themes, political revolution, and social critique through innovated mechanics and complex narratives; games like *The Beginner’s Guide* are exemplary expressions of the medium’s maturation. As a metanarrative work, Wreden’s game critically reflects on the medium as a form of expression to raise important questions about industry trends that ask developers to hand over control of the narrative to the player.

As Katherine Isbister argues in *How Games Move Us*, games offer players a whole new emotional palette of experience that is not possible in other media (8): player agency enables games to evoke feelings of pride, guilt, frustration, camaraderie, and complicity (41). For Dean, the affective dimension is crucial to capturing the subject in communicative capitalism; for this reason, she argues, “a media theory that is critical has to forswear the affective enterprise of contributing the feeling-impulses of hope and reassurance and offer thinking instead” (32). While games can evoke powerful feelings to draw players into their narratives, the ability to act in a game world creates in the player a sense of responsibility, which can be harnessed to engage players in “wicked problems,” situations that have “unclear boundaries and no clear solutions” (Sicart 100). It is through these more ambiguous moments of decision that developers might create moments of critical reflection.

At its core, this project draws a parallel between Dean’s critique of communicative capitalism and the obstacles that games face as an art form to theorize games as a possible site for critical media theory. Ultimately, the very same impulse that drives communicative capitalism is responsible for the player-centric trends in the game industry that developers view as an obstacle to their art. *The Beginner’s Guide* provides an entry point into theorizing games as a kind of critical media theory. The complex interaction between its narrative and mechanics provides a useful context for thinking through Dean’s analysis of the book to explore how this work can be adapted to games and how critical games might resist communicative capitalism.

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