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<u>Free to Play/Pay to Win: Consuming Competition through Online Gaming in the</u>

<u>Neoliberal Age</u>

Brandon Jones

Growing up with video games for most of my life, I have noticed a number of trends in the industry. One of the most obvious trends in gaming is the enclosure of gaming to the virtual spaces of online gaming (Andrejevic 238). There are numerous good qualities about this transition such as the ability to remotely patch glitches, or the ability to store entire libraries worth of games remotely without need for any physical disc. However, there are also numerous negative qualities in this transition to the digital space, such as games shipping unfinished because they can be patched later, or the growing fear that purely online gaming could usurp all forms of physical copies. However, nothing is more concerning for me than the growing online marketplace of micro-transactions - in game purchases that enhance some aspect of the game whether aesthetic or through gameplay advantages - within games that allow for uneven competition or superfluous aesthetics meant to display social hierarchical status within the game's community. An example of the former can be seen with free-to-play games such as *Candy Crush Saga* that allow for players to buy in-game materials increasing their chances of success. On the opposite side of the micro-transaction spectrum, some games, like *Overwatch,* use these purchases for aesthetics as a way to display status to other players. Micro-transactions reinforce our relationships with scarce resources in our leisure time, complementing our contemporary social choices in economics and decades of deregulation and privatization known as "Neoliberalism" (Harvey). As Don Mitchell has noted, "culture is politics by another name" (13). We can see how the politics of

competition over unnecessarily scarce resources has become cultural in the games that we consume. In this paper, I elaborate how this movement stems from the cultural condition of competition in our neoliberal society and how these conditions are struggled over.

Modern ideologies of competition in American society can be dated back to the Industrial Revolution, where economic elites supported a particular strain of Social Darwinism, economic survival of the fittest (Young 1). This philosophy of Social Darwinism intersects with laissez faire economic philosophy and hinges on the concept that competition be left unhindered by government intervention. Social Darwinists stressed that any interference with the market would impede human progress by restricting "superior" individuals from dominating the market and helping society (Young 1). As the US labor movement grew in strength in the late-19th Century, this laissez-faire capitalism stressed the importance of competition and inequality to exist in society. In his famous piece, "The Gospel of Wealth," (1889) Andrew Carnegie lays out the importance of such ideals:

> The contrast between the palace of the millionaire and the cottage of the laborer with us today measures the change which has come with civilization. This change, however, is not to be deplored, but welcomed as highly beneficial. It is well, nay essential, for the progress of the race that the houses of some should be homes for all that is highest and best in literature and the arts, and for all the refinements of civilization, rather than that none should be so. Much better this great irregularity than universal squalor. Without wealth there can be no Maecenas. The 'good old times' were not good old times. Neither master nor servant was as well situated then as today. (Carnegie 33-34).

This form of Social Darwinism has been more and less accepted at different points in American history since then. Carnegie instills in his proponents the value of competition amidst a world of scarce resources. According to Social Darwinism, without competition, we would all live in universal mediocrity. In Carnegie's description, competition is not discriminatory. In fact, this idea of Social Darwinism allows everyone to compete for the chance at success. This idea of accessing success through competition can be seen in some of the famous literature of the time, most notably novels by Horatio Alger. Alger propagandized through his stories that all Americans could "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" through hard work and diligence, thus making them better able to compete (Sweeney 90).

Neoliberalism and Competition as Freedom

By the late 19th Century, unchecked competition had also led to a plethora of unsafe, inhumane, and anti-competitive practices by corporations, which the expanding urban populace was no longer willing to tolerate. Over time, unchecked competition would be restrained through legislation such as the Sherman Antitrust Act, as well as through social movements like the labor movement of the early twentieth century (Neuman 315). During the Progressive Era (1890 – 1920), competition in the marketplace was heavily regulated to protect public interests due to a public distrust of large corporations and their greed (Neuman 315). This type of regulatory philosophy continued in the New Deal era (1933-1974) of the Roosevelt administration, extending to Keynesian Economics. This new type of macroeconomics, which some call "embedded liberalism," argued that government intervention in the marketplace could reduce the impact of bust periods in the economy (Jahan, Mahmud, and Papageorgiou 53). However,

a growing economic crisis meant that this trend would eventually shift back to a focus on private competition with little government intervention. David Harvey notes: "By the end of the 1960s embedded liberalism began to break down, both internationally and within domestic economies. Signs of a serious crisis of capital accumulation were everywhere apparent" (12). A new economic philosophy would come to fruition that stressed the importance of limited government and private competition: neoliberalism.

In his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* David Harvey outlines the basic definition of Neoliberalism as stressing private, individual entrepreneurial freedoms over the public sector. The state's duty in a neoliberal society is to insure that the institutional framework allows for private property rights, free markets, and free trade (2). Harvey notes how neoliberalism intends to be successful: "Privatization and deregulation combined with competition, it is claimed, eliminate bureaucratic red tape, increase efficiency and productivity, improve quality, and reduce costs, both directly to the consumer through cheaper commodities and services and indirectly through reduction of tax burden" (65). In Neoliberalism, society benefits from maximizing the extent and frequency of market transactions. To maximize this, neoliberalism seeks to, quite literally, enclose all human action into the domain of the market (3). The hope in Neoliberalism is that through mass accumulation, wealth will trickle down from the upper class down to the lower class.

<u>Competition as Cultural Power</u>

Neoliberalism becomes pervasive amongst the populace because it turns its tenets into moral and ethical ideals. Neoliberalism took the seductive ideal of individual freedom as the focal point, and any idea that "threatens" individual freedom, particularly in market decisions, is therefore a threat to liberty itself. In this way, Neoliberalism is a throwback to the "Gospel of Wealth." Such rhetoric turns the Neoliberal tenet of competition into an idealistic solution for the problems plaguing society. For example, welfare is viewed in a negative light in Neoliberalism because it not only uses taxpayer money, and threatens the taxpayer's freedom to their capital, but it also encourages dependency among the poor and decreases their freedom in the process. The Neoliberal thought is pervasive because it turns all arguments into individual accounts rather than collective social problems. If one is failing in the market, they must not be competing hard enough or have stopped competing. The issue could not be, by this logic, that there are not enough good paying jobs.

Neoliberalism's ability to ingrain itself and its tenets, like competition, as cultural values is described by Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony. Although Gramsci never provided a precise definition of this concept, American cultural historian T.J. Jackson Lears describes cultural hegemony as:

> the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (411)

In other words, cultural hegemony is the theory that the ideas of ruling class are interpreted not just as norms, but also as universal ideologies. These ideologies are then perceived as beneficial to everyone. In reality, these ideologies are only beneficial to the ruling class. The capitalistic value of competition can therefore be seen as embedded in society through cultural institutions such as churches and schools.

Cultural hegemony is not just a theory of normalizing the slanted ideologies of the ruling class, but also the theory of legitimizing them for everyone else. This legitimization through superstructures can be seen in spontaneous philosophy, which can be described as the philosophy accessible to everyone (Lears 413). On the prevalence of spontaneous philosophy, Lears states:

> This philosophy is contained in: 1. language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content; 2. "common sense" (conventional wisdom) and "god sense" (empirical knowledge); 3. Popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of "folklore." (413)

Groups are able to selectively refashion the available spontaneous philosophies to create their own worldviews, or as Gramsci called this, a "historical bloc" (Lears 414). In order for these historical blocs to achieve cultural hegemony, they must craft a worldview that has a wide range of appeal, and has some plausibility of being in the best interest for society (Lears 414).

With this understanding of cultural hegemony, the correlation between video games and the hegemonic value of competition in neoliberal capitalism becomes more

evident. In video games, competition is embedded in the very language, or rather coding, of the game. Players in video games must compete against some form of obstacle to achieve their goals.

An early example of this can be seen in Atari's *Pong* (1972). In the home console version of *Pong* (1975), players compete against one another, or against a computerized player, in a version of virtualized ping-pong. The game distinctly marks who is winning and losing via the scoreboard on top. In the context of competition, the importance of *Pong* is not merely in its existence. Rather, *Pong* derives meaning in its relationship to competition as a cultural value. Throughout the 1970s Neoliberalism and its Social Darwinist tenets began to spread. David Harvey notes this change stating: "Neoliberal theory, particularly in its monetarist guise, began to exert practical influence in a variety of policy fields. During the Carter presidency, for example, deregulation of the economy emerged as one of the answers to the chronic state of stagflation that had prevailed in the US throughout the 1970s" (22). Because of these clear distinctions between haves and have nots, *Pong* acts as a cultural institution reinforcing the capitalistic values of competition. However, the home console version of *Pong* is a much more localized version of indoctrination, thus limiting its scope on creating hierarchies within the game itself.

A more regionalized example of competition integration into video games can be seen in the arcades of the 1970s and 1980s. Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter describe the arcades' popularity as such:

> Pinball parlours had become especially popular hangouts for young males, mostly
>
> from the working classes. Electronic devices had already been integrated into this

milieu: the flashing lights and beeps of pinball and gambling machines punctuated

the action, heightened the carnival atmosphere, and beckoned to new players with

dramatic announcements of success and top scores. (91)

The field for competition became much larger in the arcades in comparison with the one

versus one nature of *Pong.* With the addition of localized scoreboards for each cabinet,

players compete against not only the obstacles of the game, but with other players to

attain success. Leaderboards allowed for users to compare each other's scores in the

hopes on being on top. However, one's place on the leaderboard does grant them any

material gains necessarily. Instead, these leaderboards, in the context of the neoliberal

economics of the 1980s, reinforce notions of a scarcity of resources for which we must

compete over. In this case, that scarcity of resources is seen in the top spot on the

leaderboard. Rosati explains:

> In this sense, the theft of the worker's labor is compounded by having to buy it
>
> back from its owners with the crumbs of wage-labor, and the surplus then goes to
>
> expanding the system for its own sake. This is poverty for Marx: not the simple
>
> appearance of higher or lower wages, but the absolute subservience of social life
>
> to the needs of commodities and their metamorphosis through the circuits of
>
> capital. (13)

The arcades also have the added component of requiring a capital investment each time

someone plays. With a relatively small amount, usually a quarter, players get to compete

for better scores. To actually become a virtuoso at a cabinet, requires practice and money.

When looking at the additional monetary side of arcade gaming, one might

wonder the importance of this notion. People are able to decide whether or not to spend

their money all at the arcade themselves. However, this type of individualized thinking ignores the additional problem with the arcades: people with extra discretionary income can buy success. The more money you have, the more practice you can have at the game. While practice does not ensure success at an arcade game, it does increase your chance for success in the form of additional practice.

However, many aspects of video gaming's cultural power push us beyond standard understandings of hegemony. Many argue that hegemony is no longer a useful way to describe these power relationships. This can be seen, for instance, in some of the work of French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard. Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter explain:

> Baudrillard's book *The Consumer Society* (1970) argues that it is no longer possible to believe in a fixed and universal set of human needs, nor in the traditional social relations that political economies claimed organize those needs. Consumer culture, he argues, is motivated less by the "need for a particular object as the need for difference (the desire for the social meaning)." The perceived instabilities of postmodern culture arise not only from digital technologies but also, according to Baudrillard, a mediatized marketplace. This means that commodities are not just objects but sources of meaning. Jeans, cosmetics, cars, food choices, games – all communicate messages about who we are, where we stand, or what we aspire to be. (71)

At its core, some philosophers push hegemonic theory away from the Marxist idea of the class struggle. It is not that a class struggle does not exist anymore. Instead, the struggle to produce meaning happens across a multitude of mediums. Sociologist Nicholas

Thoburn states: "class, or better class struggle, is not a category of identity but is a perspective for approaching the continuous combat to configure life in the value-form against that which would resist it, and the forms of subjectivity that arise from that struggle" (87). Rather than view the world via means of production, this post-hegemonic tendency can be examined in the populaces' modes of consumption. Building off of this idea, Zygmunt Bauman refers to this shift toward commoditization as his proposed institutional framework known as the "society of consumers": "a society in which adapting to the precepts of consumer culture and following them strictly is, to all practical intents and purposes, the sole unquestionably approved choice; a feasible, and so also a plausible choice – and a condition of membership" (53). Thus, consumption and competition enter into a symbiotic relationship where consumption of the unnecessarily scarce resources across these different multitudes is a reinforcement of Social Darwinist class standings.

Power from Within and the Move to Online Gaming

In the vein of a relatively new neoliberal society, this extension of hegemony allows us to see these issues at the individual levels rather than en mass: "In post-hegemonic politics, there is organization from the inside: there is self-organization. It is no longer like *le people* or the proletariat-like mechanism with the brain on the outside, now the brain – or something like mind – is immanent in the system itself" (Lash 60). In Bauman's "society of consumers" idea, the individual has even become commoditized: "Becoming and remaining a sellable commodity is the most potent motive of consumer concerns, even if it is usually latent and seldom conscious, let alone explicitly declared"

(57). Video gaming addresses something beyond or extending hegemony, a new form of competition previously unexamined: competition from within.

This idea of examining power from within is illustrated in Michel Foucault's notion of "discipline." Foucault explains: "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. It is not a triumphant power, which because of its own excess can pride itself on its omnipotence; it is a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated but permanent economy" (188). Competition is a form of discipline. *The Sims* (2000) video game illustrates "discipline" as competition. In the game, players create avatars that are meant to complete tasks that are merely acts of consumption, thus reinforcing power relationships in the real consumer society (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, de Peuter 283). Not accomplishing the objectives of the game lead to the demise of your avatar, poor social interactions with other avatars, and even death. The player sees these interactions in the game and then can internalize the power of consumerism to ensure they "accomplish" these objectives in the real world. Here, players in this digital world engage in a rehearsal for scarcity by rule, scarcity as a game, as natural scarcity does not exist in this context.

This idea of control from within can be seen even more with the advent of online gaming. MMO-RPG *World of Warcraft* (2004) is an example of this. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter describe the game as such: "Characters ascend the ranks of Azeroth's society by going out into the wilds and slaying creatures, completing preset quests and tradeskilling. Increases in 'experience' are registered through the MMO convention of 'leveling up'" (130). Each character starts at level one and works their way

up, eventually maxing out until the next form of downloadable content (DLC). The game does not allow for there to be a final winner, which would place a limit on consumption, as more and more DLC add to the experience.

The competition of the game stems from the ever-grinding nature of its design. However, competition in the game is even more complex than that. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter state:

> What complicates the game is, however, that as in most MMOs, access to certain elements of game content is only possible through cooperation with other characters, usually of different races and classes, whether in short-lived 'pick-up groups' assembled on the fly, or larger and longer-lasting 'Guilds'. The vertical and horizontal lines of the game grid are thus cut across by a transversal path of player cooperation and self-organization. It is this cooperative requirement that gives MMOs the social complexity that engrosses so many players, and hence the persistence necessary for their publishers' commercial success. (91)

With *World of Warcraft,* there is also the addition of competition as a social game mechanism. How one decides to go about these cooperative moments of the game rely on competing against one another for a spot in a "better" Guild. Even within each Guild is a form of hierarchy that creates competition within the Guild for a better position in the hierarchical order. In the context of the globalized economy of the 1990's to the present, *World of Warcraft* and online gaming spread competition across the globe (Harvey 51). This socialized competition also coerces players into continuing to play, thus pay the monthly subscription fee through reinforcing the idea that their status in the game is a scarce resource that the user must compete over.

<u>Candy Crush and Micro-Transactions</u>

This socialized component of competition brings us to another kind of game: mobile gaming. Advancements in technology over time has allowed for mobile gaming to match, on a technological level, their console, computer, and arcade predecessors. Mobile gaming allows for users to consume their games on the go or in the comfort of their home. *Candy Crush Saga* (2012) is an example of mobile gaming. *Candy Crush Saga* is a puzzle game where players are given a fixed number of moves to swap "candy" positions with the intended goal of aligning three or more similar candies either vertically or horizontally. To unlock the next puzzle, the player must complete the puzzle within the fixed number of moves. Along the way, players can also unlock a fixed amount of "special ingredients" that ease the difficulty of the puzzles, although these run out rather quickly. Players are then given the option of waiting for a substantial amount of time for these "special ingredients" to replenish, or they can simply pay for more. These low cost forms of virtual goods are known as micro-transactions (Larche, Musielak, and Dixon 1). These micro-transactions allow for players to circumvent the actual design of the game to just play it the fast way and finish it.

Competition is present in the game not just in the game mechanic of competing against each puzzle, but there is also a competitive social mechanism as well. *Candy Crush Saga* was originally made as an app for Facebook and every subsequent mobile version has some form of connectivity to Facebook where people can share their progress in the game or challenge others to beat their scores. This is where the issue of micro-transactions within the game comes to the forefront. We can see that there is a commoditized sense of belonging along with the idea that games represent cultural

institutions that promote certain values that implicitly and explicitly develop spontaneous philosophy of competition. Then, in the case of free-to-play games like *Candy Crush Saga,* winning and becoming the best-commoditized self is pressured by who is willing to pay the most for their game experience. While these micro-transactions do not guarantee success, they do greatly increase the chance for success due to the ability to gain actual mechanisms that ease the difficulty of the objectives. This is significantly different from the situation of the arcade where I can pay for more practice. With free-to-play games, one can quite literally pay to win the game and share your consumer success with your peers. The more capital you have/spend, the more of a winner you are.

One might then ask about the validity of micro-transactions for purely aesthetic components, like outfits for characters as seen in Blizzard's *Overwatch* (2016), rather than for gameplay-influencing bonuses. However, even these forms of micro-transactions are deceitful and go back to a form of competition over scarce resources in the commoditized social order:

> *Being* ahead in sporting the emblems of the style pack's emblematic figures is the sole trustworthy prescription for gaining the conviction that if it was aware of the aspirant's existence the style pack of one's choice would indeed accord the desired recognition and acceptance; while *staying* ahead is the only way to make such an acknowledgement of 'belonging' secure for the desired duration.
> (Bauman 83)

Although this form of consumption does not reflect the traditional competition of gaming, it does reflect a form of social competition within the game. These aesthetics are meant as a form of displaying to others the consumption you have fulfilled. Therefore,

aesthetic micro-transactions are still purely coercive in that they help one with the capital to afford it the ability to rise through the commoditized social order of the game. A player who came across another player with an "emblem", that is either achieved in the game or bought in a micro-transaction, would hold that player in higher regards because of the perceived challenge to attain the "emblem". Even if some players reject this notion, these micro-transactions reinforce the illusion that possessing more commodities, including virtual ones, is a struggle over forms of individuality. In this case, we entertain ourselves with the ideology "that it is the simple possession of commodities that constitutes *freedom*" (Rosati 9).

<u>Conclusion</u>

In the context of an increasingly privatized economic system, avoiding micro-transactions is not easy for gamers. Game developers provide numerous expansive additions to games via online marketplaces. However, gamers in the consumer culture today need to be aware of the coerciveness of micro-transactions that influence gameplay or the perceived performance of the game. By examining games via the spontaneous philosophy of competition as a game mechanism along with the historical context of Neoliberal economics, one can see that micro-transactions are not an easily avoidable part of a game. Instead, micro-transactions use coercion via competitive advantage as a way of exploiting gamers and simply reinforce a false sense of competition over perceived scarce resources.

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