

The End of Capitalism: Disengaging from the Economic Imaginary of Incremental Games

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Journal: Games and Culture (2019)

Keywords: idle games; incremental games; interpassivity; automation; 'pataphysics

Abstract

The article investigates how players of the incremental game *AdVenture Capitalist* write about the end of the game, and the end of capitalism with it. The game visually and mechanically represents the economic imaginary of frictionless capitalism, characterized by endless and self-sufficient growth. *AdVenture Capitalist* has no end, and does not require the player's interaction. The analysis shows that players' responses to their marginalization from an endless simulation are pataphysical: they privilege the particular over the general, the imaginary over the real, the exceptional over the ordinary, and the contradictory over the axiomatic. In so doing, players occasionally raise imaginary solutions to the end of capitalism. Examining the written traces of players' disengagement from the simulation, the article intervenes in broader debates regarding the effects of games. It concludes that exceptional cases of overinterpretation reveal a complex transformative approach towards video games and the political and economic ideology represented therein.

AdVenture Capitalist was released by Hyper Hippo Productions in 2014. It belongs to the genre of incremental and idle games: playful simulations that, once started, keep increasing their internal score regardless of player intervention. These games continue to play themselves and, theoretically, they never end. Player choices while playing the game are geared towards accelerating the overall score as quickly as possible, in the knowledge that (theoretically) the accumulation could continue forever. My aim here is to explore how players of *AdVenture Capitalist* write about the end of the game, and the end of capitalism with it.

The publisher markets the game as a “simulation of capitalism” (Kongregate, 2018). The kind of capitalism here represented is a frictionless economy characterized by dematerialized and continuous growth, where labour itself can be delegated, automated, and ultimately obliterated. It is the same late form of neoliberalism that currently generates fears and anxieties for its unstoppable depletion of resources of planet Earth and the transformation of labour in meaningless, “bullshit” jobs (Graeber, 2018). The game’s consumption is similarly deprived of human presence: choices are almost entirely meaningless, and interaction with the simulation can be entirely delegated and automated through specific upgrades known as “managers”. Players have written on the publisher’s forum about how the game might be completed. There are YouTube videos and online guides with specific indications as to how to finish the game. In this article I consider texts produced by players of *AdVenture Capitalist* on the publisher’s forum between 2014 and 2018. In reading these paratexts, my provocation consists in turning to ‘pataphysics, the science of imaginary solutions, as both a methodological and political strategy. As I will argue, players identify exceptional solutions that mark their own personal completion of the game. In other circumstances, they just pretend to have finished the game. On occasion, the frustration at not being able to complete *AdVenture Capitalist* is translated into a political interpretation of the text,

seen as an allegory of the failed promises of capitalism. However, rejections of the economic imaginary of the game are exceptional, sporadic, and the possibility of escalating towards a shared political strategy is self-censored by a firm belief in “capitalism realism” (Fisher, 2009). Forum posts are here analysed in their statistical *irrelevance*, identifying the strategies that a small number of users deploy to construct imaginary solutions to capitalism while maintaining that no alternatives are possible.

AdVenture Capitalist serves as a peculiar case study. Game studies have rarely focused on the overinterpretation of ludic texts, that is, on how signs within a simulation could be overestimated and interpreted as saying something that they never intended to say (Eco, 1992). The effects of games on their players have been identified by Bogost in the “simulation fever”: the “nervous discomfort caused by the interaction of the game’s unit-operational representations of a segment of the real world and the player’s subjective understanding of that representation” (Bogost, 2006, p. 136). The effects of games have been imagined as deriving from use, while at the same time abstracting the act of play and identifying a relation of causality with specific properties of electronic texts.

The procedural rhetoric of *AdVenture Capitalist* does not explain how and why some players decide to elaborate and share personal interpretations of the game’s functioning and meaning, while being in direct contrast to what the game does and says. The game is relatively similar to most incremental games but explicitly represents the economic imaginary of frictionless capitalism. To understand and evaluate player’s affective reactions to this game, it must be analysed in both its computational and representative strategies (Anable, 2018). To this end, I examine “when and where” *AdVenture Capitalist* is played, focusing on the “particular behavior” that some of its players manifest (Sicart, 2011). I explore the “essential, and unbridgeable, gap,

between [the player's] experience of the game, ... understanding of the game as system, and ... awareness of an underlying implied game object" (Vella, 2015). In addition, I analyze the written traces left by players of their non-scalable and non-replicable interventions. Following the "minimal ethics" outlined by Joanna Zylińska, I claim that "it is these disruptions to the process that, first, allow us to see the process as a process, and, second, that make the process interesting as an event" (2014, p. 38). The events analyzed herein are minimal in that they are barely visible: they only appear on forums or videos, have a few or no responses, and are never repeated by the same author. If theories on gamification and games-for-change have elaborated sophisticated strategies for player *engagement* (their repeated and visible, thus quantifiable and marketable, use and interpretation of games), we do not yet have a theory for how players *disengage* from games. We do not know how to take into account the non-scalable and extemporaneous departures from the game's logic that players occasionally undertake.

In my case study, the molecular nomadic departures from the procedural rhetoric of the game could be particularly relevant for a critique of capitalism. They are not just relevant in understanding how the game has failed the expectations of some of its players, and how developers have exploited consumers' addiction to the never-ending cycles of the free-to-play product. These disengagements depart from the economic imaginary of the game, one that is explicitly framed (albeit with some irony) on the utopia of frictionless capitalism, and which closely resembles the imagined future of the political economy in which the game is produced and consumed.

This article directly responds to Seth Giddings' (2018) call to analyze and evaluate games for the economic imaginary that they reproduce, promote or challenge. As Giddings argues, early game studies paid more attention to games as economic phenomena. The relation between games and economic systems was often understood as being isomorphic: games were "models of economies

in their own right, their virtual worlds both simulating (more or less accurately) the logic of late capitalism and meshing in more or less complicated ways—through play—with player’s everyday lives and sense of self” (p. 2). However, Giddings argues that the act of play can metamorphically transform the endogenous (in-game) and exogenous (external to the game) economy. Play could then provide a “seedbed for new formations and resources for behaving and imagining differently within and against the prevailing cultural and political economy” (p. 16). Here I analyze a specific case where the separation between the internal and external economic systems has been put into question.

Ultimately, I welcome Giddings’ call for a “surrealist ethnography (or hyperrealist ethology) of simulacral culture” in game studies (2007, p. 402). Following Giddings’ invitation to play with the intellectual tradition of Jean Baudrillard’s thought on simulacra and simulations, the article concludes that players’ responses to the game are *pataphysical*: they are subjective, privileging the particular over the general, the imaginary over the real, the exceptional over the ordinary, and the contradictory over the axiomatic (Hugill, 2012, p. 4). In so doing, while retaining a belief in “capitalist realism” and the impossibility of alternative political economies (Fisher, 2009), players of *AdVenture Capitalist* produce simulacra of other (im)possible times in which capitalism and its simulation(s) come to an end. In other words, the end of capitalism that players envisage does not translate into a scalable political strategy. It is a personal affair, a space of autonomy, an event that disengages them from the cyclical processes of frictionless capitalism and its repetitive games.

The world’s easiest game

AdVenture Capitalist (2014) is an incremental and idle video game released by Hyper Hippo Productions for internet browsers, Android and iOS phones, and Sony's PlayStation 4. The game is advertised as the "world's greatest capitalism simulator" (Hyper Hippo Productions, 2018). The latest version has three settings: Earth, Moon, and Mars. The player must invest their funds in ten different types of businesses. On planet Earth, for instance, the businesses range from lemonade stands to oil companies. Investments generate returns over time. Returns can be invested into larger quantities of the same businesses (for instance, buying more lemonade stands, or more oil companies), which will exponentially increase and accelerate the economic return. Money can also be used to acquire upgrades that multiply the profits or decrease the costs for new businesses. Relatively soon after starting the game, the player can also hire a manager whose duty is to keep the businesses at work, saving the player from having to click at the end of the production cycles. Once managers are activated, the game can increase its score even when the player is not actively clicking. In other words, the game encourages the player to leave the game playing itself. The player could theoretically close the app and return to it even after hours, days, or weeks, only to find that their fictional capital has grown.

Cycles of investments and returns are at the core of the game, and they are further enhanced by a reset function that accelerates the rate of capital accumulation. At any moment, the player can reset the progress reached until that point, lose all the money accumulated, and only save a number of "angels". The angels' score is relative to the increase in capital and it increments while the game plays itself. Once the game is reset, the angels' counter converts into a multiplier which affects the speed at which the businesses generate income. This dynamic effectively allows to rapidly regain the capital that was lost during the reset. Resetting the capital while increasing the angels count could be essential in reaching the game's targets quickly. Players who engage with the cycles of

reset ultimately aim at increasing the angels' counter, as this allows for an exponentially higher increase in profit. However, as already observed, players could theoretically reach the same targets by avoiding any interaction with the app and waiting a much longer time.

Hyper Hippo Productions explicitly advertise their game as the “world’s easiest game” (Kongregate, 2018). The actions required to keep going with *AdVenture Capitalist* are minimal or non-existent, and rarely thought of as “meaningful play” (Salen and Zimmermann, 2003, pp. 31-37). The game shows an unstoppable and incremental accumulation of fictional wealth, and from the comments available online (and the author’s personal experience) it could be argued that a major part of the interest of “playing” *AdVenture Capitalist* derives from the accelerating and exponential increase in the score and the possibilities it affords. *AdVenture Capitalist* plays with extraordinary numerical figures. The capital escalates to trillions, decillions, unvigintillions, novemquadrantillions and, according to urban legends about the game, a googol (1 to the 100th power) can also be reached (Kongregate, 2014). Videos on YouTube frequently document a specific mode of playing which spectacularizes the reset function. Players let the game play itself for a long time (sometimes over a year), only to return to it, show the high score reached, reset the score, and then rapidly re-gain it through the newly acquired angel multiplier. The result of a long period of accumulation then becomes the starting point for an exponentially faster increase in capital.

AdVenture Capitalist is one of the most popular incremental and idle games. The genre is a “minimalist gaming phenomenon in which the game is left running with little player interaction” (Alharthi et al., 2018, p. 1). Similar titles are also known as clicker, background, or ambient games. While games are conventionally imagined as challenging their players, incremental games are resolved by waiting. Alharthi et al. (2018) note that the level of interactivity varies across titles.

Games such as *Progress Quest* require no attention from the player, while *AdVenture Capitalist* can involve a minimal amount of interactivity (p. 5). Acquiring upgrades and businesses, and planning a score reset, can be identified as possible forms of player interaction. *AdVenture Capitalist*, compared to other incremental and idle games, also makes its references to capitalism more explicit, while others tend to be framed around themes, narratives and genres that are not necessarily related to an economic ideology.

AdVenture Capitalist's pace of play (assuming the player decides to play it) adapts to the modes of fruition of smartphone games, characterized by brief engagements which “fit easily into the busi-ness of everyday life” (Keogh and Richardson, 2018, p. 23). Hyper Hippo's title belongs to the broader phenomenon of casual games: titles addressed to the general public, owners of smartphones and laptops rather than dedicated consoles (although a PlayStation 4 version has also been released), and who would otherwise be “unable to fit a game into their lives” (Juul, 2010, p. 5). Long considered at the margins of video game culture, casual games comprise a large market in the game industry as they appeal to audiences that would not normally be attracted by “core” titles (Chess and Paul, 2018). Smartphone games are often presented as free-to-play apps but include micro-transactions that are used to accelerate or ameliorate the experience. The practice of paying to expedite the game becomes particularly counterintuitive in incremental games, where waiting can be a crucial component. For instance, in *AdVenture Capitalist* in-app purchases provide the profits of the next 24 hours without having to wait for the next day (a boost that costs about \$1). Keogh and Richardson observe that players of these games are generally aware of the exploitative nature of micro-transactions and tend to think of them as a form of investment in their experience (2018, pp. 21-22).

AdVenture Capitalist and other commercially successful idle games, such as *Clicker Heroes*, have normalized the genre while capitalizing on its unexpected popularity (Deterding, 2016). Their success demonstrates that players are largely self-aware of the apparently contradictory nature of their experiences. It is no surprise that *Cow Clicker*, a game made by scholar Ian Bogost in 2010 to critique the rise of “waiting” games such as Zynga’s *Farmville* on social media, was initially received positively by casual players who were not necessarily aware of the critical intent (Bogost, 2010). The game replicated the sense of gratification, control, and effortless improvement that was at the root of *Farmville*’s success, and which partly explains the subsequent success of idle games (Tanz, 2011; Bogost, 2016).

The pleasure of not-playing

Idle and incremental titles contradict the common-sense understanding of video games as experiences based on active player participation. In the early years of game studies, interaction has been specified and renamed, clearing it of the enthusiastic and deterministic claims that put it at the heart of the digital revolution. Posthumanism has served to deconstruct the dualism between interactor and machine, shedding light on the lived assemblage of human and nonhuman minds, bodies, and environments (Giddings, 2005; Keogh, 2018; Galloway, 2006). Nonetheless, to make sense of idle and incremental games, a redefinition of interactivity might not suffice. What appears to be lacking in these games is anything that could make interactivity, agency or participation in any way meaningful.

Sonia Fizek has argued that the focus on interactivity and agency in game studies has obscured the presence of forms of pleasure that derive from passivity and interpassivity (2018). Fizek concludes

that “idling may be understood as delegated pleasure derived from the act of outsourcing gameplay onto the game itself” (2018, p. 142). The pleasure of delegating pleasure, also known as interpassivity, was first theorized by Robert Pfaller (1996) and Slavoj Žižek (1997) in response to the emergence of the notions of interactivity and participation in art criticism. The two authors argued that examples of interpassivity have always been present in the history of art. For instance, the chorus in ancient Greek theater would react to the performance, thus anticipating the audience’s participation, and contemporary American sitcoms typically include canned laughter (Žižek, 1997, p. 34, cited in Fizek, 2018). Interpassive media supply the process of their own reception, taking away the effort of participation from consumers, and providing a “thievish joy”: the pleasure of having escaped the pressure of being recognized as the subject of pleasure (Walz et al., 2014). Fizek provides a summary (and a portmanteau) of both Pfaller and Žižek and introduces a novel concept in the study of games: the *jouissance* derived from playing (see also Brown, 2015). As Fizek concludes, in “an idle game, the player’s *agency* collapses in a subversive *act* of play delegation. The player makes an attempt to click themselves away from the responsibility of being the sole agent” (2018, p. 153, my emphasis). To summarize, the pleasure derived from playing games might not necessarily depend on engagement with(in) a process of rules and instructions, but instead comprise varied positionings inwards and outwards, which occasionally result in the delegation of the very process of consumption.

Although Fizek does not dwell on the semantic opposition implied by her choice of words, I intend to articulate her distinction between *agency* and *acts*. Agency implies the abstraction of a regular, repeated process. By contrast, acts are singular events, not yet and not necessarily identifiable within a pattern. *AdVenture Capitalist* deprives players of meaningful acts. While players have a form of agency in the capitalism simulator, the process of participation is rendered homogenous

and emptied of any meaningful action. The perseverance of players should not come as a surprise. As Tom Brock observes, video game consumers frequently suspend instrumental thinking and elaborate their own failure, questioning themselves and their relationship to the game (Brock, 2017). The “cataphatic”, that is, rational and functional dimension of players’ behavior is often emphasized in studies on games. However, as Brock argues, players also derive value from the “apophatic” dimension of play, that is, “from the deeply conflictual, yet nevertheless profound, challenges that are presented during play” (p. 168), which “open up a space for players to connect more deeply to their gaming project in both psychological and sociological ways” (p. 169).

Players reflect on their failures in the online forums and communities where the game is discussed. *AdVenture Capitalist* is not played on smartphones as much as in the contexts of its users’ online communication. The game is played when the app is closed. In these contexts, players articulate the possibility of finishing the game, thus introducing a definitive *act*: an event, or final move, that would give meaning to the hours spent clicking on (or waiting for) the game. The imaginary solutions to the otherwise homogenous, unstoppable, and endless increment of scores are then confronted with the game’s inevitability: the game does not stop, regardless of the players’ decision to put an end to it. Here the cataphatic and apophatic dimensions co-exist: players construct strategies to master the game, while negating the possibility of control or pleasure. The economic imaginary that underpins *AdVenture Capitalist* is put into question within the *impasse* of both agency and enjoyment.

Economic imaginaries and their subversion

As Giddings argues, early game studies were more attentive to the representation of economic systems within video games. For instance, the early work of Julian Stallabrass is explicitly critical of digital games as they “obsequiously reflect the operation of consumer capital for they are based on exchange, an incessant trading of money, munitions or energy, a shuttling back and forth of goods and blows” (1993). Stallabrass argues that self-improvement in video games is “unambiguous” and invariably “a matter of trade”, thus providing an allegory of the individualistic and liberal ideology of contemporary capitalism. It also contributes to construct an economically-minded imaginary of the self, which could be compared with the more recent Quantified Self movement and its use of self-tracking technologies. A critical analysis of the medium as allegorical of the logic and structure of late capitalism can be found in later studies. Kline, Witheford, and De Peuter identified in *The Sims* a reproduction of the value exchange of post-Fordism. In these conditions, the player “takes up—but could also subvert symbolically—digital capital and learns to elaborate its logic—a logic to which she or he is already a subject” (Kline et al., 2003, p. 279).

The shared preoccupation in these early investigations into the economy of digital games is the relation established across the internal (in-game) and external (real-life) systems of production of value. Giddings questions whether, and how, players could move beyond an isomorphic interpretation of the relation between the two systems. He argues that there are many instantiations of metamorphic transformation across the economic models. These subversions of the rules of the game and its dynamic of play could turn into alternative forms of imagination of the cultural and political economy. Everyday practices of play subvert the logic of scarcity and constraint of the in-game economy and open towards gestures that are excessive, wasteful, emergent, as happens for instance with the use of cheat codes, when exploiting a game’s bugs or in practices of speedrun

and videorec (Giddings 2018; Menotti 2014). Paying closer attention to these practices reveals varied interpretations of the internal logics of ludic systems.

AdVenture Capitalist represents, even if light-heartedly, the anxieties of fully automatized labour (Rifkin, 2011; Srnicek and Williams, 2015), while combining them with the business ontology of capitalism realism, which believe that “it is simply obvious that *everything* [...] should be run as a business” (Fisher 2009, p. 17). Thus, it becomes important to evaluate how it affectively *works*, “in the sense of how these types of games work culturally and ideologically, and how they work on us and work us in terms of impinging on our feelings, our identities, and our everyday lives” (Anable 2018, p. 74). The economic imaginary evoked by *AdVenture Capitalist* is not just marked by the marginalization of the player and the automation of its internal processes of accumulation. The game simulates a specific type of economic ideology, one that completely deprives economic accumulation of any material grounding.

The game could be compared to *Universal Paperclips*, a 2017 incremental game by Frank Lantz. *Universal Paperclips* shares with *AdVenture Capitalist* the logic of automatized accumulation. However, it foresees a possible end scenario where the matter of the entire universe has been converted into paperclips, a condition which stops its incremental production. *AdVenture Capitalist* instead embraces a fully dematerialized and disembodied imaginary of capitalism, which Bill Gates once defined as “frictionless capitalism”. As Žižek notes, frictionless capitalism is the “social fantasy that underlies the ideology of cyberspace capitalism: that of a wholly transparent, ethereal medium of exchange in which the last trace of material inertia vanishes” (2006, p. 181). However, Žižek argues, it is not only the friction generated by materiality that disappears in this fantasy, but social antagonism. The worker’s position is made to disappear, in

the same gesture that transforms the universe itself and its economy in a self-regulating, self-sufficient, and self-fulfilling system.

In the economic imaginary of *AdVenture Capitalism*, labor is made irrelevant and the exchange value of its product is nullified. However, the activity of the laborious player has not entirely vanished. Players can feel the pressure to engage with the system, spend time by clicking and elaborating strategies to reach certain targets, spend money via micro-transactions and watch in-game advertisements, but the result of this activity does not lead to a final achievement. Anything that can be bought in the ludic system can only be exchanged with upgrades or businesses that will, in turn, generate more fictional money. Players' engagement is represented as a joke, a farce. It is the same farce that David Graeber (2018) has identified in the proliferation of "bullshit jobs" within core capitalist societies: occupations that are seen as largely pointless and unnecessary—even to those undertaking them—which merely serve to justify the very existence of the job. Players of *AdVenture Capitalist* can easily identify that the economic model represented in the game is similar to that in which they work and live, both "vast engines for producing nonsense" (Graeber 2018, p. 146). However, there is no satire or critique in *AdVenture Capitalist*. Although the game often adopts an ironic and absurd tone in its communication, it overidentifies with frictionless capitalism, while only hinting at the idea that its realization is impossible within the given physical constraints of our universe. The game's progression on Moon and Mars, and the description of the upgrades as defying the rules of physics (an irony shared by other incremental games, such as *Cookie Clicker*) never moves towards an explicit political critique, as suggested for instance in *Universal Paperclips* and its references to the material and ecological limits of capitalistic progression. The players' overinterpretation takes its departure from their own

obliteration from the dynamics of play, the disappearance of political and ludic antagonism, and the absence of satire.

How do I put down this game?

Here I analyze how players of *AdVenture Capitalist* have written about the end of the game on the online forum of the publisher Kongregate. The analysis is limited to those threads where players explicitly refer to the game's end. The selection has been made by analyzing threads published between 2014 and 2018 that use terms such as "end", "finish", "beat", "complete", and associated terms. In total, the analysis involves around 85 threads of varied length (some of which include fewer than five posts).

Numerous posts published since the game's release in 2014 discuss the possibility of completing the game. These usually start with a general question about whether, and how, the game could come to an end. In the thread "I completed the game", started in August 2014, the first post invites users to write once they have reached the end of the simulation. The first reply immediately challenges the initial post by questioning whether a real end is possible: "I would assume completion means all achievements achieved, right?"¹ Users respond by posting pictures of their progress and showing the achievements that remain unlocked. One user, for instance, claim to be short only of the ambitious "Googol", "Googolplex", and "Capitaltastic!" targets. Throughout 2014 there is an evident increase in the number of users who post pictures claiming that they have completed, or are close to completing, the full list of achievements.

¹ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4725-general/topics/427242-web-version-i-completed-the-game#posts-8377980>

However, these posts are usually challenged by users who debate whether the achievement strategy could reasonably be considered a legitimate way of completing the game. A common critique is that the accumulation of money does not stop after fulfilling all the achievements, thus the game is not technically finished. The challenge would then be to determine which player on the forum has the highest rate of accumulation of capital. This alternative way of playing the game would then establish an ever-open “high score”, which is seen by those who support it as more appropriate to the never-ending nature of the game. In the thread “ENDING (no spoilers)”, started in March 2015, a user states that the “game has no ending. You can get all the unlocks, yes, but if you wan [sic] to keep making money then there is no ending. Once the upgrades are used, the angels wont [sic] help much.”² A confused player in December 2014 explicitly asks: “is there an expected end for this game?” Another user replies that “getting all achievements is currently considered ‘the end’” and maintains that while many players are considering it a satisfactory completion, it is only a partial and contested method of finishing the game.³ A popular thread initiated in March 2015 (titled “how far are you in the game?”) launches a competition and invites other users to share visual proof of how much money they have accumulated. The thread lasts until 1 May 2015. The original poster invites other players to give themselves goals and find motivation to play the game by following the forum’s challenges. The declared objective is no longer to reach the temporary targets provided by the simulation or aim at a chimeric final point in the accumulation of wealth, but to find a purpose by confronting oneself with the other players involved in the forum.⁴

² <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4725-general/topics/476518-web-version-ending-no-spoilers#posts-9022885>

³ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/454341-end-of-game?page=1#posts-8728456>

⁴ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/481747-how-far-are-you-in-the-game?page=1#posts-9080415>

Players who strive to reach the end of the game are frequently dissuaded. Users argue that developers at Hyper Hippo are constantly planning upgrades which include new achievements. The more the game is played, and as more users download the app, the more upgrades will be released to extend player engagement. Thus, aiming at achievements can only be considered a temporary ending, as new series are regularly added by the developers to postpone a potential sense of completion. In the thread “How do you complete the game?”, February 2015, a user writes that “there’s no real ‘end’, although the dev[eloper] is working on an expansion that has something to do with Space.”⁵ The user is referring to the Moon and Mars expansions that were subsequently released. A post from July 2015 argues that reaching 3,700 newspapers (a business of the Earth section of the game) was considered the end of it “until a month ago”.⁶ At the time of writing, the game has more than 200 achievements after the “Capitaltastic!” achievement that was considered the final and hardest one to obtain in the early stages following the game’s initial release.⁷

Users make comparisons with other idle games and argue that it is becoming a convention among players of this genre to consider their task finished once all achievements are completed, even if this type of game will continue to play itself and new objectives will be released. In the thread “End of game”, January 2015, the original poster provokes the developers, asking: “what about giving this game an end and free us all?” A player replies: “endless idle games are rather pointless especially when the goalposts keep getting moved back. It’s reminiscent of the ‘Guitar Heroes’ episode of South Park where the kids were playing a video game that never lets the players ‘catch the dragon’. In the end games like AdCap get to be more work than work, just less fun and with

⁵ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/472897-how-do-you-complete-game?page=1#posts-8978378>

⁶ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4725-general/topics/422040-web-version-adventure-capitalist-strategies>

⁷ https://adventure-capitalist.fandom.com/wiki/Cash_Upgrades

no paycheck.”⁸ A thread in November 2014 proposes the notion of a “Legitimate Finish”. A user argues: “before this gets out of hand it is ‘OK’ to finish the game. The way I see it nobody is unhappy about it.”⁹ The tone of these posts is often sarcastic and cynical. Users frequently refer to finishing the game as “getting it done”. It is presented and discussed as a job whose completion is always postponed and can only be finalized once players give themselves a personal target, or one that is shared across the community of users. There is a general sense of anxiety around establishing a legitimate end to the game, as it would allow players to give up the game without feeling guilt for the time spent on it.

The stress is increased by users who write threads about unrealistic and specific strategies that would bring the game to a completion. These include a pattern of acquisition of businesses and upgrades that is allegedly the result of calculations on the difference between costs and profits generated through each step, and which accelerates the pace of wealth accumulation. The strategies are difficult to prove, as it would require a vast amount of time (or micro-transactions) to emulate the same type of progression. As such, it is unclear whether some of these posts are attempts to “troll” other users, having fun at their desperation to complete the game. In the thread “What happens in the end?”, March 2015, users provide confusing (and probably false) answers to the original poster, who asked whether anything special happens once the game is finished (and taking for granted that it can be finished): “It tells you, you made too much money”, one argues. Another user writes: “It runs out of suffixes, so it uses ‘TOO MUCH’ as a suffix. Then it goes to ‘\$Inf.Mil’ which is pretty much infinite. Then it resets to \$0.00 and locks there and you can’t buy anything

⁸ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/464241-end-of-game?page=1#posts-8860211>

⁹ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/449920-legitimate-finish?page=1#posts-8668236>

and you need to do a hard reset.”¹⁰ These posts prompt demands for visual evidence that these scenarios actually occurred. The catchphrase “pics or it didn’t happen” is frequently used on these occasions. However, most users only comment once or twice in the forums and do not reply to these requests, which keeps these possibilities in a condition of perpetual virtuality. Considering the many updates on the product, it is possible that some of these scenarios actually appeared in an earlier version and have been later corrected. I must also take these statements as being neither true nor false. The “too much” ending is mentioned, for instance, in another thread from January 2015: “the game DOES have an end. After septuagintillion cash, there are no new words. Everything after that is called ‘Too much’”. However, other users reply that this is just a technical limitation of the game and not its real end, not a “logical goal achieved”.¹¹ There are no other mentions of the “too much” ending after 2015.

Players explicitly invite those who seek to complete the game to stop playing it altogether. A user asks: “how do I put down this game?” The answer: “if you have an iPhone, tap and hold it’s [sic] icon until it starts shaking and a little X icon shows up in the corner of the game’s icon. Tap on that X button. Enjoy the rest of your life. Remember not to play stupid games like this one ever again.”¹² Similar comments are typical of the sense of dissatisfaction and cynicism against the developer and feature more prominently in the forum activity of the most active players. Hyper Hippo are accused of having created an addictive and unsolvable game with the sole purpose of selling upgrades via micro-transactions or cashing in the revenues generated by the advertisements.

¹⁰ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/477582-what-happens-in-the-end?page=1#posts-9035726>

¹¹ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/464241-end-of-game?page=1#posts-8860211>

¹² <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/476517-how-do-i-put-down-this-game?page=1#posts-9022925>

The anger is directed towards those players who show off their scores, as they are accused of having bought upgrades. In the thread “I completed the game”, August 2014, a user is accused of having reached a score that could only have been possible by spending real money on the game. A disillusioned player comments: “this game is so realistic. Only way to become the richest is to be born rich (pay kreds) or cheat the system without getting caught.”¹³ The game is described as deceptive, effectively stealing money from users without supplying the final sense of satisfaction that one would expect from such a significant investment in time and, ultimately, money.

The sense of dissatisfaction is multifaceted. Players react with anger and cynicism against Hyper Hippo and those players who proudly claim to have mastered their product. But the anger is also directed towards themselves for having decided to play the game and feeling obliged to reach its completion. The game is often defined as an addiction, a bad habit that many would prefer to break if only they were given a reasonable excuse to consider their activity “done”. In February 2015, the thread “Way to Go Hyper Hippo!” starts with an angry comment against the developers and argues that “players [cannot] handle an idler spanning several millennia.”¹⁴ The same user in December 2016 implores the developers: “give us a means to play this version to the end in a time that is still consistent with an idle game, but not requiring centuries to finish.”¹⁵

Those who claim to have finished the game often confess to not feeling satisfied. The temporary completion leaves them with the feeling of having believed in an empty promise. In the thread “I completed the game”, a player who was given to believe they had completed all the achievements finds out that with the next upgrade in September 2014 there will be a number of additions that

¹³ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/427242-i-completed-the-game?page=1#posts-8377980>

¹⁴ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/714115-way-to-go-hyperhippo>

¹⁵ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/691207-call-it-what-it-is>

will push them back, far from completion: “it doesn’t feel like I really won at this point.” Another user shares the same feeling: “actually finishing the game left me kind of sad. It’s been like a drug for some time now. Can’t wait for the next phase. Although i realize the next phase will be just like this one, upgrade, idle, reset, upgrade, idle, reset. Then win. Then the next phase. And so on”.¹⁶ In February 2015, a user concludes: “there is no end, only a beginning.”¹⁷

The “End” of Capitalism

The transformative potential of *AdVenture Capitalist* originates from feelings of disillusion and anger. Players understand that the only way out is to break the repetitive and homogenous cycles of capitalistic accumulation that the game simulates by introducing personal, imaginary, and exceptional breaks. The “end” of *AdVenture Capitalist* is written and thought of in quotation marks. When the end of the game is raised by players who are aware of its infinite logic, it is discussed while acknowledging its impossibility. Players write about “finishing”, “ending”, “beating” the game, or getting it “done”. The use of quotation marks denotes that they are aware that this is only a partial and strategic perspective on how to put an end to the game’s infinite cycles of repetition and accumulation, and one which is not going to be shared by other players on the forum.

However, from the realization of being addicted and stuck in a condition that knows of no exit, players articulate a feeling of disillusionment with capitalism more broadly, understood as an

¹⁶ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/427242-i-completed-the-game?page=1#posts-8377980>

¹⁷ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/472897-how-do-you-complete-game?page=1#posts-8978378>

economic and political system. In January 2015 a user argues: “the lack of an end and the degeneracy into just increasingly absurd numbers with no question to why or the cost is pretty much the crux of this game’s artistic statement on capitalism, and having an ‘end’ would ruin it, unless it was completely melting the planet and killing all human inhabitants (see: koch brothers)”.¹⁸ The player is here referring to Charles and David Koch, the American billionaire owners of Koch Industries, often accused of financing anti-climate change movements in the USA. The post receives only one reply (“Well said. Kudos.”) and is not followed up, not even by the same user in other threads.

In November 2014, a technical crash brought many players to comment on the forum in search of an explanation for the app’s malfunctioning. A user argues that “perhaps this is a message, because capitalism IS broken! Wait till it happens in real life!” and another user replies: “agreed, Capitalism will break down at some point in time. Let’s play Adventure Communism!!”.¹⁹ Hyper Hippo Production has in fact released another idle game title *AdVenture Communist*, which plays in a similar way to *AdVenture Capitalist* but is set in a fictional and parodic version of Soviet Russia (for example, the lemonade stands are replaced by potatoes, and angels by science). The user is, in other words, arguing that even the opposite alternative to a simulation of capitalism has already been attempted, and that ultimately it is of the same repetitive nature as its capitalist counterpart. Sarcastically, and adopting a capitalist realist stance, the user is suggesting that even though capitalism and its upshots have already failed, there are no imaginable alternatives.

¹⁸ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/464241-end-of-game?page=1#posts-8860211>

¹⁹ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/445481-this-is-the-end?page=1#posts-8610533>

In March 2015, a user publishes a lengthy statement against *AdVenture Capitalist* and the political economy it represents. The post is the first in a thread about the end of the game, although the nature of this specific completion is never clarified. It is worth citing at length:

So, what now. We all knew this moment would come and we've invested a large part of our life and attention to do it. I feel like I've done something amazing yet the feeling was a bit empty in the end. Now I see how capitalism works in real life too. Thanks for opening my eyes. Just because there are unlocks and achievements ahead of us doesn't mean we should strive for them. We should earn enough to feed ourselves and then start enjoying our life. Reaching the end of the game is actually reaching the end of your life. You die and it was all for nothing. All the money I had is now gone and I've wasted my life. To finish the game you should delete it, playing the game is actually you losing.²⁰

The first reply to this post repeats the common and unresolved question: “wait, does the game actually have a definitive end?” The question remains unanswered.

***Capatalism*: imaginary solutions to capitalism realism**

Capatalism is the name I give in this article to the reframing of capitalism and its imaginary that emerges from the sporadic comments that critique *AdVenture Capitalist* and its lack of a definitive end. The word originates from Kongregate's forum, where users occasionally misspell capitalism replacing the first “i” with an “a”. The typo introduces an involuntary reference to *'pataphysics*, the “science of the particular” and of “imaginary solutions” theorized by Alfred Jarry towards the

²⁰ <https://www.kongregate.com/forums/4721-general/topics/476518-ending-no-spoilers?page=1#posts-9022885>

end of the 19th century (Jarry, 1996, pp. 21-22). The typo is, indeed, only a coincidence, and its appearance on the forum should be regarded as an exception. However, exceptions are the foundation of 'pataphysics, which investigates and challenges how modern science attributes the foundation of general rules to the correlation among events. Jarry's 'pataphysics is an a-systematic and non-dogmatic study of the exceptional *as* exceptional, a science which studies the “games governing the special occurrence of a sporadic accident” (Bök, 2002, p. 9). In the final section, I argue that 'pataphysics can help us to better understand *AdVenture Capitalist* and its overinterpretations, while avoiding the assimilation of players' reactions, and their desperate attempts to put an end to the game, within an abstract response to a computational procedure.

Players of *AdVenture Capitalist* do not offer political alternatives. Their anger, disillusionment and disappointment are not expected to scale up towards a different political and economic ideology. Their writing is concerned with getting capitalism and its simulation “done” on a personal level, and to stop obsessing over its eternally postponed promises of happiness. They seek an end to the game while knowing that this cannot be found in the game. Thus, the end must be invented, for instance by introducing exceptional rules, solutions that do not match with the outcomes of the simulation. Some users hope that their goals will be shared by others on the forum, or they explicitly ridicule other players and their quest for a solution. On a few occasions, players direct their disappointment towards capitalism as a political economy, and against their own inability to imagine an alternative. The economic imaginary of the game is challenged. However, this article argues that the occasions in which the game's endogenous economic system is seen as an allegory of the exogenous are important as they are seen as exceptional interpretations even by their authors, who do not expect these to generate a discussion or to be followed up. A political

critique of capitalism should explore the dynamics that make these comments invisible, even to those who decide to articulate them.

'Pataphysics, in its numerous and dissonant apparitions in the last century, has been presented as a reframing of the epistemologies of modernity. René Daumal argues that 'pataphysics is "knowledge of the specific and irreducible" (1929). Jarry observes that 'pataphysics challenges modern science as it questions the principle of induction, which attributes to the majority of cases the status of universal law, thus eliminating from view the exceptions and unexplainable phenomena. Thinking of the universe as comprised of exceptions, instead, "implies an *equivalence* between imaginary solutions" (Hugill, 2012, p. 9). Jean Baudrillard was notoriously inspired by 'pataphysics and saw in it an alternative to the imaginaries to late capitalism. Within hyperrealism—where the internal logic of the simulation becomes indistinguishable from reality—the only viable strategy is 'pataphysical imagination: "if there is a return to pataphysics, it's not in terms of argument or solutions, but a return that is itself imaginary, a kind of singular horizon" (Baudrillard, 2004, p. 5; see also 1994, pp. 1-9).

My argument here consists in flattening the various forms of (dis)engagement of the players of *AdVenture Capitalist* and glean the marginal and minimal traces of political critique left on Kongregate's forum. Ultimately, such modality of knowledge might be the only viable strategy when trying to imagine the end of capitalism, a form of imagination that is becoming particularly urgent as the effects of its frictionless form have manifested themselves in the ecological disasters of the Anthropocene. Fredric Jameson (2003) famously argued that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This appears evident not just among the players of *AdVenture Capitalist* but also within the contemporary critiques of global warming and the sixth mass extinction of life from planet Earth. Finding traces of the exceptional ways in which players

have imagined the end of *AdVenture Capitalism*, not giving them value as a necessary response to its computational and representative strategies, could shed light on the numerous forms of imagination of the end of capitalism that are made invisible by our dominant modes of knowledge.

Conclusion

Following Alfred Jarry, and Andrew Hugill's commentary on his work, players' writings about the end of *AdVenture Capitalist* can be summarized through the principles of 'pataphysics (Jarry, 1965; Hugill, 2012, p. 4). Their solutions are subjective and privilege the particular over the general, as they find personal ways of finishing the game, and strategies to consider themselves satisfied with it. They privilege the imaginary over the real, as the real is seen as inevitably subsumed under the logic of capitalism. They prefer the exceptional over the ordinary, as the ordinary precludes the possibility of being "done" with the game. Finally, they favor the contradictory over the axiomatic, as the principle governing the game becomes untenable and exhausting, and the only way out is to contradict its logic. The escape route must be invented by creating a difference, an extraordinary event in the otherwise homogenous cycles of repetition within the incremental game.

The players' challenge to the game's economic imaginary does not develop into a political strategy but is no less significant. The prospect of scaling up is self-censored: players tend to share the belief that no sensible alternative to capitalism is possible. Capitalism and its simulation are interpreted as necessary burdens, imposing laborious and repetitive tasks which one can never be "done" with. However, in these conditions both play and labour are revealed in their absurdity. Interpassivity explains the pleasure derived from automatizing the process of play, but it does not

eliminate the presence of metamorphic acts that challenge the game's endogenous economic system by transforming it into what it never meant to be.

Game studies have often focused on the effects of games as deriving from rules and design strategies, and dependent on the procedures of computational logic. However, these modalities of knowledge have marginalized cases of player disengagement. These can be exceptional and almost invisible, minimal forms of opposition to the game's logic and the ideology it represents. They can contradict the developer's explicit intentions. The angry comments and imaginary strategies analyzed on Kongregate's forum are rendered invisible even by their own authors, who often start threads knowing that few people, if any, will respond to them. At the same time, they articulate brief escape routes from capitalism, its promises of infinite growth and repetitive cycles of disruption and accumulation: the same ideology that underpins the current global ecological crisis. It might be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of *AdVenture Capitalist*. Nonetheless, there might be something of value in these minimal and surreal fantasies of a different game.

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