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SIMULATION AT WORK: AN ANALYSIS OF JOB SIMULATOR VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis attempts to connect Marxian criticism to games studies by analyzing job simulator games and their enforcement of capitalistic tenets. I will argue that the ludic and semi-narrative functions of job simulator games reinforce capitalism's tenets of efficient accumulation, disavowal, and the need for protective arms of the capitalist state. To argue this claim, I use a variety of studies covering games and Marxian critique. My foundational text of study is Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* which provides definitions of these tenets and helps identify my claims of how these games propagate a lacking alternative to capitalism. The games I will be focusing are *TCG Card Shop Simulator* (OPNeon Games 2024), *Thief Simulator 2* (CookieDev 2023), and *Police Simulator: Patrol Officers* (Aesir Interactive 2022). The studies and works I include are Frederick Jameson's theories on displacement and reification, Aubrey Anable's theory on affect, Jesper Juul's theories on game and real-world spaces, Patrick Jagoda's theories on the experimental nature game design inhabits, Kunzelman's potential labor from *The World Is Born From Zero*, and Chu's definition of cognitive estrangement all show the gamification of labor and the blurred lines between the real and digital worlds we now inhabit. This thesis continues their conversations, and creates a framework to see how video games introduce and propagate capitalist ideologies with or without intentional development.

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Preface

Before the idea to write about job simulator games came about, I was playing Coffee Stain Studios' *Satisfactory*. Released in 2024, it was being actively developed during its four-year early access period where players paid to test the game before the game's 1.0 release. From its Steam store page, the logline explains that "*Satisfactory* is a first-person open-world factory building game with a dash of exploration and combat."[1] When starting a new world save, the player is tasked by FICSIT, a corporation the player works for, to explore an alien planet and "exploit" it for the corporation's gain by contributing to Project Assembly.[2] The project requires a massive space elevator to transport resources extracted from the planet and manufactured by the burgeoning factory to other colonies throughout the explored universe. FICSIT gives the player a personal AI companion named ADA who informs the player about their environment, the resources they extract, and the next goals for the player to accomplish.

The main gameplay loop is developing the factory to be efficient and self-sufficient through automation while accomplishing the goals the player is tasked with. First, the player builds resource extractors to mine minerals. Then, they build manufacturing plants to take those minerals, refine them, and create various complex items to then send off-world. To facilitate this process, the player also builds conveyor belts to transport resources from mineral extraction to manufacturing to delivery, automating the entire factory flow. The player must also build power generators to facilitate the factory's electrical needs using organic resources such as plants or water to power these facilities. The player's overall goal is creating the most efficient factory supplying FICSIT with all their needs.

As I was playing *Satisfactory*, it was not hard to notice the satire displayed by ADA's voice lines reminding me that I was there to "explore and exploit," and that FICSIT relied upon me to sustain their corporate activities for the good of Earth.[3] However, Coffee Stain Studios was not beating around the bush, so to speak, when highlighting the gross malpractices of sending a singular pioneer to an alien planet to exploit it for resources while ADA, in a monotone voice says the player is here to create "short-term solutions [for] long-term problems."[4] However, the palpability of the game's satire does not cause any severe deviation from its gameplay loop and I found myself continually playing the game for hours on end. After about eight or so hours of consistent gameplay, a message popped up informing me that "FICSIT Pioneer Benefits include 15 minutes of rest per day!"[5] The game told me to take a break, and I did not listen. After several hours passed, another message popped up. It read "FICSIT would like to remind you that while resting is not an activity valued by FICSIT, being unable to work due to fatigue is heavily frowned upon."[6] From these notifications, I noticed a disconnect between the developer's intentions and my role as a player. I was told to work as efficiently as possible, yet the break messages were in place to make it known that this is simply a game. It didn't make sense.

As it has been pointed out, the purpose of *Satisfactory* is not to work, per se. The purpose is to automate the factory, and in doing so, the player is removed as an actor and is merely an observer of the factory's processes. Those processes like extraction, manufacturing, and export mirror real-life situations albeit the differences between game and real-life are apparent. Yet, the emotions I felt being told to take a break in a game simply did not line up with the world Coffee Stain Studios created. There was a bending to the capitalistic tenets of efficient accumulation allowing for healthy gameplay in a break notification. Thus, I asked a question how do games

with simulated work display capitalism, and are they done well? What I found out was a niche group of games surrounding potential labor and job simulation.

Introduction

This thesis attempts to connect Marxian criticism to games studies by analyzing job simulator games and their enforcement of capitalistic tenets. I will argue that the ludic and semi-narrative functions of job simulator games reinforce capitalism's tenets of efficient accumulation, disavowal, and the need for protective arms of the capitalist state. To argue this claim, I use a variety of studies covering games and Marxian critique. My foundational text of study is Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* which provides definitions of these tenets and helps identify my claims of how these games propagate a lacking alternative to capitalism. The games I will be focusing are *TCG Card Shop Simulator* (OPNeon Games 2024), *Thief Simulator 2* (CookieDev, Ultimate Games S.A. 2023), and *Police Simulator: Patrol Officers* (Aesir Interactive 2022).[1]

Job simulator games have risen in popularity partly due to media influence from streaming sites like Twitch playing these games for an audience.[2] The popularity of streamers playing "normal" jobs where they can enact a variety of behaviors that would not translate well to these real-world professions have translated to these games selling well.[3] However, these games with their mundane gameplay loops seem to go against the assumed entertainment value that video games tend to operate from. Games are generally known as entertainment products allowing the player to play a fictionalized character in a fictionalized world. So, it begs the question, why are job simulators so popular?

My method to analyzing these games is to use a close reading analysis within a Marxian framework to identify how these games promote themselves, what features and interactions the games offer, and how these all connect to the capitalistic tenets mentioned by Fisher. However, this thesis is not historical, nor will it cover specific games outside of job simulator games unless for context. In this introduction, I will define the terms that will be used throughout this thesis

providing the relevant information in game studies, affect studies, and speculative media studies. However, some terms will not be defined as this thesis operates from a basic knowledge of game studies. I will then provide a general outline of the Marxian studies I am using to argue my claim and definitions of those capitalistic tenets. In the proceeding chapters are where my close readings will occur. In chapter 1, *TCG Card Shop Simulator* will be discussed regarding efficient accumulation. In chapter 2, *Thief Simulator 2* will be discussed regarding disavowal. In chapter 3, *Police Simulator* with be discussed regarding the need for protective arms. Finally, I will conclude this thesis by identifying the need to expand upon the scope of this study.

Simply put, these games situate the player as a worker at a simulated job. By placing the player at the forefront of decision making and action, the player can unintentionally or intentionally enforce these capitalistic tenets as features of gameplay in the form of loops. However, there are many games like these on the market today and it can be argued that all video games are at one point or another simulated work.[4]

Simulation Games

Since video games are simulations of real-world or fictionalized properties, it is important to define what simulation is in video games and how I use it when referring to the job-simulator games this thesis covers. According to Mark J. P. Wolf's *Encyclopedia of Video Games*, the entry on "Simulation Games," written by Patrick Crogan and Joshua Jarrett, is defined as "video games that involve the player in controlling several elements of a dynamic system that is modeled by the video game."[5] In other words, a simulation game is a world that mirrors a dynamic reality where the player is involved in the decision-making process or actions within that world. Players can be knights in a dynamic high fantasy world, criminals in a

dynamic urban metropolis, or any number of simulations where the player enacts their role in-game. The generality of Crogan and Jarrett's definition shows that all games are simulated experiences allowing the player to embody a role and with no genre conventions, simulation games can be anything if there is a player.[6] However, they make a distinction. For them, there are "games in which the player principally plays through a position situated within the game's world or arena" and "games in which the player spends a significant amount of time operating interface controls that affect the game's world from a position 'above' or outside it."[7] Crogan and Jarrett's distinction focuses on player position. If the player is in the world either through a first-person or third-person perspective without interface controls, then their actions can directly affect the world they are playing. These actions serve to embody the player through non-player character (NPC) interactions or combat. If the player is outside of the game's world, then the player is disembodied. This disembodiment allows the player to function through making results-based decisions through interface controls. Their examples of this disembodiment promote the genre of management games where the player manages a dynamic system, like in *SimCity* (Maxis 1989).[8] Still, there is a complication where games allow players to embody the role provided and are still able to use the game's interface to make decisions within a dynamic system. Crogan and Jarrett continue to explain that when games "position the player within the game world with an interface that [it] is more about utilizing the world's conditions and reacting to their challenges than managing their overall development."[9] In other words, games that combine these distinctions do not fully utilize the interface controls like management games; they only use them for player integration in the world such player status and experience points like in role-playing games (RPGs).Though their definition of simulation games is helpful, it does not thoroughly define the simulation genre's complexities one can find in job-simulator games.

In Patrick Jagoda's *Experimental Games*, he connects experiments to simulations in a profound way that serves to expand upon Crogan and Jarrett's definition and helps to define my understanding of job-simulator games. Jagoda writes:

> [Experiments] are inherently artificial constructions that nudge and modulate reality's constellation of potentials in ways that allow for observation that would have been otherwise impossible. Games, too, are artificial constructions that can compress particular experiences and model small subsets of the present world.[10]

The artificiality with experiments is directly linked to how video games are artificial constructions. For Jagoda, he merely describes a high school scientific methods class where an experiment is conducted to test a hypothesis and provide data to prove or disprove it. Games do the same thing by providing a hypothesis on whether the player can or cannot interact with the game world they are situated in. The player, regardless of position or type of control, is the one who nudges and modulates a simulated reality's potential changes. Then, the player can observe the results of those actions and continue to repeat or change those actions to their liking within the game's confines. These confines are just small subsets of the world, but there can be numerous types of worlds that can be played or, in Jagoda's understanding, experimented within allowing for the unobservable to be observable.

Jagoda goes as far as to imply that within video games the potential number of experiences and models are near limitless, especially within a player's potential interactions. Video games are interactive worlds where players can act in a variety of ways. Unlike Crogan and Jarrett's distinctions, position does not matter to Jagoda. These interactions always contain an element of the player and the interface, both serving as models of the present world. These models can cover realism or fantasy, sometimes even combining the two, allowing players to observe their worlds and their place in them. However, one can still reach the same conclusion as was mentioned earlier that all video games are simulation games where a player can interact and

observe all result types. While this is true to an extent, there still is no definable distinction within the simulation genre and games like first-person shooters (FPSs) which simulate potential violence. Jagoda emphasizes his understanding of simulation by saying that "a simulation game may seek to model the real world with degrees of calculated external validity."[11] There is a mirroring of the real-world in simulation games, but it is within the degrees of player empowerment through interface control. Jagoda's simulation definition helps in connecting and furthering Crogan and Jarrett's distinctions as a combinatory experiment of player interaction within the world and the ability to observe the results. Yet, there still remains the complexity of a job-simulator's differences from other types of simulation games regarding the objects being interacted with.

It can be generally stated that the objects in simulation games facilitate player interaction and contribute to the simulation.[12] So, objects are the means to further embody the player. However, within Jagoda and Crogan and Jarrett's definitions, objects are never mentioned. Yes, Jagoda implies that within a simulation, like an experiment, the player only interacts with the simulations construction to see the results which can be argued are objects for player interaction. Still, he does not define fully those objects being used to "nudge" the simulation.[13] So, the problem with the term "object" is essential to expound upon when defining simulation games.

In Ian Bogost's *Unit Operations*, he mentions the adoption of object technology (OT) where it "provides a framework for developers to create units of programmatic meaning that can be reused in different ways and for different applications."[14] In essence, within a simulation, objects can be created not only for their interactivity but also for creating meaning. Object technology becomes a qualifier behind a developer's creative elements or the text, so to speak, within a simulation.[15] However, Bogost switches to the term *unit* to describe objects in

simulations because an object "underscores their status as *discrete, material things* in the world" rather than units and their operations that "not only define people, network routers, genes, and electrical appliances, but also emotions, cultural symbols, business processes, and subjective experiences."[16] Objects are described to reference their materiality and not their function. So, when using Bogost's term unit operations (UO), an object then implies more than its materiality but also describes the meaning an object can take on. It is important to note that business processes are mentioned as a part of UO because if business processes can be simulated, then there is a deeper meaning within the transactive process between player and simulation.[17] Now, these operations can be analyzed within simulation games as materials that provide meaning making worth discussing.

Now with Crogan and Jarrett's, Jagoda's, and Bogost's definitions of simulation, simulation games, and unit operations, a definition of job-simulator games can be constructed. Job simulator games are a type of simulation game where a player is positioned in a first-person perspective that interacts with units like merchandise, customers, and companies to facilitate and control their company by way of business transactions and job operations that can be observed within the game's world.[18] This definition covers all the qualities job simulators implement and separates them from Crogan and Jarrett's management games by having the player focus the interface controls towards business operations that affect the player directly. By attributing meaning to these operations, it can be reasoned that in each job simulator game produces capitalistic tenets as the economics within job simulators are based on simulated reality. However, before I relate job simulators to economics of capital, it is important to relate how embodiment and affect are used to keep players playing these games.

Embodiment and Affect

There is a general understanding that players need reasons to continue to play a game. With job simulator games embodiment and affect holds the player in place to continue adhering to the interactivity these games present. According to Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the definition of embody is "to cause to become part of a body; to unite into one body; to incorporate (a thing) in a mass of material, (particular elements) in a system or complex unity."[19] In other words, to embody something is uniting an abstract concept into physical material. In games, the physical player embodies an abstract character using tools such as a keyboard and mouse or a game console controller to move and interact within the game's world.[20] When discussing player positions, the first-person perspective literally allows the player to embody the character, allowing them to observe the results of their actions first-hand and up close.

While I have already laid out my definition of job simulator games, it is important to identify this first-person perspective as necessary for the simulation to work well. The observations necessary to facilitate simulated work can only be accomplished through a method of embodiment. From scanning items at a cashier to breaking into a home, the interaction needs a embodied player to perform those actions. The work they enact can only mean anything if they can see themselves committing the action first-hand. Since the job's work and business transactions conducted in a job simulator have stakes only in the game's world, to elicit a mundane performance of a job's task, embodiment becomes one of the motivating factors in partaking in simulated work.[21] However, embodiment also includes affect theory to achieve the motivation factor in players working a simulated job.

There have been many studies about affect theory, but for this thesis, I will be focused on the working theory for game studies.[22] According to Aubrey Anable in her book *Playing with*

Feelings, affect refers to "the aspects of emotions, feelings, and bodily engagement that circulate through people and things."[23] Simply put, affect are the emotions a person can have while engaging with any form of media. Anable notes that affect can "have a social and political force" that "shapes the surface and very being of subjects and objects as they come into contact with each other."[24] Affect is a subjective experience, and within video games the subjective responses to a game's world, narrative, or interactions are based within a relationship between the game and the user.[25] This relationship is embodied, and as Anable points out, "embodiment is given shape and dimension by proximity and distance, access and occlusion, facing and turning away."[26] When embodiment and affect are in alignment, the player will feel as though they are a part of the game's world, feeling the dimensions, the interactions, and the simulated realism that is found in simulation games. Returning to embodied positions, Anable's argument for affect mirrors how job simulators position the player to participate with the work. In working, the player will then feel the emotions a worker may have in those situations: pride, joy, disappointment, and frustration. All these emotions cause further embodiment within the player as worker and promote continued play.[27] The gameplay loop continues to offer the player a reason to continue play because the loop provides emotional Yet, a question is brought to light that asks how can representation be shown accurately regarding the material in a job simulator game if there is a fundamental subjectiveness to affect?

Representation, Allegory, and Cognitive Estrangement

Anable makes the claim that embodiment and affect provide a certain type of representation. She writes that "through affect at the ludic interface, we see how our bodies, images, and code are meaningfully entangled. Representation has always been an embodied

experience, and representation matters, *is* matter."[28] While I agree with her claim that a game's mechanics and imagery, and its interactive elements do provide a basis of representation that creates affective meaning within video games, the problem arises when a player's embodiment is not represented accurately in a game at all. Video games offer fictionalized worlds that may be represented well, but the player may not feel that representation leading to a disconnect between game and player. Regarding job simulator games, most offer blue collar work to players who may or may not have had that experience, which is the underlying issue if one were to accept that representation matters. To contextualize the issue, when *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix 2005) was released, players had to use a controller in the shape of a guitar to play the game, tapping colored buttons on the guitar's neck like holding down strings, while flipping a switch bar like strumming notes on the guitar's bridge. While the game's physical media simulated playing a guitar, it did not have true representation of the guitar playing experience. This understanding is only known because many guitar players I knew had a hard time playing Guitar Hero, disconnecting them from any pleasure or fun the game offered.[29] It may have simulated the experience well, but it failed in its representative qualities.

Representation creates too many issues when focusing on job simulator games. These games are not hour for hour accurate. They do not require the player to labor or to show up on time. The ability to buy or sell items are locked behind experience gates that the player is required to pass. If one were to only use representation to identify the simulated nature these games offer, then it would go without saying that these representations are inaccurate and are merely inferior simulacrums, not true simulations of labor.

So, to resolve the issues representation offers, I will be using allegory to describe the relationships between affect, embodiment, and simulation. Allegory, as being used in this thesis,

refers to how Alexander R. Galloway uses it in his book *The Interface Effect*. For Galloway, "using the principle of parallel aesthetic events, and to claim that these parallel events reveal something about the medium and about contemporary life" can be properly labeled as allegory.[30] So, when making interpretations of these job simulator games, it is fundamental to identify the aesthetics in both the game and its real-world counterpart. Still, this seems to contain the problem representation has, but Galloway's argument for allegorical interpretation is not about "coming to know a world, but rather that of how specific, abstract definitions are executed to form a world."[31] For him, allegory "is a process or active threshold mediating between two states."[32] Thus, Galloway understands "machines do not *participate* in the worldly logic of essences and instances, they simulate it," and in doing so, "the computer instantiates a practice not a presence, an effect not an object.[33] Video games are aesthetic events digitized on machines that simulate real-world aesthetic events. Using allegory, job simulator games attempt to simulate the job's roles that players will enact. By way of simulation and allegory as a principle of parallel interpretation, these games do not represent the presence or essence of these jobs, but the effect these jobs can have on the individual player. Allegory further ties embodiment and affect to the effect that a job simulator's gameplay can have on a player and not how well the simulator represents the work being shown. There are generalized feelings to continue playing regardless of accuracy because the player performs in the allegorical interpretations by the developers and their own style of play, which is promoted by way of embodiment. However, what is the effect given if representation is unimportant for the matters of this thesis?

This effect that takes over the player in job simulator games is one of cognitive estrangement. The term is used by Seo-Young Chu in her book *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal*

Sheep, her book on speculative media. She defines cognitive estrangement when referring to objects as:

> Objects completely unknowable (objects with respect to which our intellects remain completely "unawakened") are merely estranging. Objects completely knowable (objects with respect to which our knowledge is "so complete that there no longer exists anything unexpected") are merely accessible to cognition. But objects of wonder (objects that produce in us "a horizon-effect of the known, the unknown, and the unknowable") are cognitively estranging.[34]

In other words, it is the player's understanding, or lack of understanding, of referent objects that produces the cognitive estranging effect. Chu uses the word cognitive to mean perception and how one perceives referents. Still, she uses this effect when describing science fiction, but I argue cognitive estrangement also has placement within games studies, especially referring to actions. When actions are knowable, the player accesses their cognitive understanding of the interaction, allowing them to fully connect with the game's world. When actions are unknowable within the cognitive sense (not because of lacking direction or tutorial information), but of perception then the player becomes estranged from the experience, disconnecting them. Coupled with Galloway's allegorical framework, referents such as in-game interfaces, actions, and objects that are not represented well are allegorical to the political and economic systems in job simulator games. The player understands the allegory being shown in these in-game systems (buying and selling), but the unknowable or the *unawakened* aspects of these systems (their simulated experiences and the mechanics within the simulations code being inherent in producing a game that is entertaining) create wonder. Thus, the cognitive estranging effect is produced by way of allegory, not representation. The referent systems are just as knowable as they are unknowable within the realm of simulation that a player is estranged from the real-world counterparts, they cognitively are aware of. This may seem like a psychological study, but it is

important to identify these effects are within interpretation of the game's systems being played through, not how they are represented in the player's mind.

Through embodying the player from a first-person perspective, the player is positioned to enact the specific roles of a job simulator game which produces an affective feeling of cognitive estrangement that is not due to the representation of the job at hand, but the allegorical interpretation of the game's political and economic aesthetics that is parallel to its real-world aesthetics. This interpretive framework not only remediates the issues of representation in video games but also connects allegorical interpretation to affect.[35] describes the methods job simulator games use to reinforce real-world capitalistic tenets and promote potential labor that will be discussed throughout proceeding chapters.

Capitalistic Tenets

It is safe to assume that through the allegorical framework that job simulator video games promote a capitalist mentality in the player's interactions in the game's world. To run a business or rebel against that system is intended to position the player as an active participant in capitalism. There seems to be no alternative to this situation. According to Mark Fisher in his book *Capitalist Realism*, he flat out states that capitalist realism is "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it."[36] Fisher's argument is meant to define the term, but for the purposes of my research with game studies in mind, Fisher explains the natural state job simulator games and their developers create. There is no alternative that can be imagined, nor can the player change the fundamental nature of the gameplay. The player must interact in the buying and selling of resources to progress the game, be entertained, and create

any meaningful connection with the game's world. Yes, a player can "turn off" the game to escape and potentially enforce noninteraction (like a boycott) against the game's systems. However, Fisher places capitalist realism as "not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism itself."[37] Once the player leaves the job simulator, they still exist in the capitalist system the game tries to simulate. Here, the allegorical framework distinguishes job simulators from other simulation games. The parallel aesthetic events are allegorical to a capitalist system that exists in the abstract, like a game, but also exists physically in the tangible resources used or acquired, like time and in-game currency mimicking real monetary amounts. Thus, there is no escape from a capitalist reality.[38]

The existence of efficient accumulation within job simulator games highlights one of the tenets that places capitalism as lacking an alternative within these types of games. I have coined the term efficient accumulation to serve as the basic premise of capital. According to the online Encyclopedia of Marxism, capital "is in the *first* place an accumulation of money," but it "is not just *wealth*… is a *social relation*, not just an accumulation of *things*."[39] Capital requires acquiring wealth, but wealth is not just monetary amounts but can be associated with time. The faster one can produce, sell, and buy, the more efficient they are in accumulation. Job simulators do not necessarily have time limit systems, but the player's time within the real world is constantly being compared to the rate of accumulation and progression in these games.[40] The first-hand experience of maintaining accumulation to a real-world internal clock is what Fisher recognizes as a part of a "'business ontology' in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business."[41] What Fisher means is all aspects of society require efficient accumulation and an allotment of time to propagate capitalism as economic and political force. By interpreting how job simulator games reinforce

this tenet, the feelings of stress, frustration, and eventual joy in accumulating or "getting it" by way of monetary business transactions or interactions within a capitalist-promoting game, one can see this in effect this tenet can have.

Another aspect to Fisher's capitalism realism is the concept of disavowal as necessary to capitalism's operations. In essence, Fisher's definition of disavowal involves "subjective disinvestment" where the term disavowal is an action that that seeks to criticize and divest from capitalism while adhering to it.[42] Fisher writes:

> the actual aim was not to replace capitalism but to mitigate its worst excesses; and, since the form of its activities tended to be the staging of protests rather than political organization, there was a sense that the anti-capitalism movement consisted of making a series of hysterical demands which it didn't expect to be met.[43]

Fisher's point stands that any attempt to disavow capitalism is an attempt to mitigate and bring to light capitalism's already tired criticisms without providing an alternative. This disavowal becomes necessary for the abstract finger of capitalism to be pointed towards greater atrocities that can be protested while allowing for hidden exploitative measures to occur

Job simulator games that attempt to comment and criticize capitalism fall into this trap. As mentioned in the preface, *Satisfactory* attempts to satirize an exploitative corporation that is seeking to colonize an alien planet. While the game's satire and criticism are apt, there is no ability to create an alternative economic system in-game to replace the game's current capitalistic system of accumulation at an automated efficiency. What the game provides is a hyper-realized form of capitalist control, that begins to seem more comedic than depressing. This affects the player from within the game by continuing to play the game as is intended, but outside of the game's world, there seems to be no dialogue looking for economic alternatives because there are none attached to the game's satire. Even buying the game supports the capitalistic market.[44] *Satisfactory*'s satire is on the nose and apparent from the start of the game's tutorial making it

seem intentional to pigeonhole the player into playing a game that is meant to be more absurd than trying to enact a revolution. So, for the purposes of this work, *Satisfactory* does not fit the criteria for Fisher's concept of disavowal.

What this work will look at are job simulators where the job fulfills a disavowal role without satire or criticism. The disavowing actions come from the job itself. However, the player embodies a role where their disavowal is still within the bounds of capitalistic cooperation. That is why capitalism, as Fisher argues, is "a hyper-abstract impersonal structure *and* that it would be nothing without our co-operation."[45] Co-operation implies that in disavowing an exploitative capitalist system, if one were to still participate in aspects of capitalism, then they are cooperating with the aspects that are the most comforting. It is important to note the hyphen Fisher uses compared with the actual spelling. With the hyphen, it implies that a group, like a co-op that achieves economic goals, believes their disavowing acts are autonomous from capitalism. However, the reality is, unless the group divests themselves from capitalism, then they are co-operating with the system believing the means justify the ends.

It is important to note that with disavowal, the user is not at fault for their attempt to combat capital. Fisher conceives the term "precorporation" to mean "the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture."[46] In other words, precoporation is capitalism's ability shape disavowal into a tool that ultimately strengthens capitalism. Fisher shows how criticisms of capitalism become a reality fostered by the system to market authenticity in its most-hated critics.[47] The critic may not know they are actively engaging in the disavowal Fisher is defining here. They are controlled to believe their criticisms could change the system, but in fact, their criticism only strengthens the apathy to try and fight it because capitalism has already precorporated any form of revolt.

Since disavowal and revolt are necessary to capitalism, so too are protective arms of the capitalistic state to maintain control over the populace. It is generally understood when talking about these protective arms that another name for this tenet is the need for police to protect property and capital. Fisher states that "anti-capitalism is widely disseminated in capitalism" and that "we have here is a vision of control and communication… in which subjugation no longer takes the form of a subordination to an extrinsic spectacle, but rather invites us to interact and participate."[48] Here, Fisher makes the claim that due to the inherent disavowal capitalism needs, subjugation is required; however, it occurs without the feeling that subjugation is occurring. It is less a spectacle as it is subjugation one places upon themselves. Fisher continues by saying the "consequence of this 'indefinite' mode of power is that external surveillance is succeeded by internal policing. Control only works if you are complicit with it."[49] The indefinite mode of power implies the abstract power laws have over a populace. Yet, within most western countries that follow these capitalistic tenets, there is a social contract between the state and the populace generally stating that if one follows the law they will be protected. This statement assures the public is complicit in their enforcement.

The public can also be complicit in how they receive media. In video games that simulate the military, players are actively portraying combatants in war under historical pretenses or speculative futures where reliving war can promote it as necessary for societal development.[50] However, these military simulators do not position the player to deal with the transactive economies that warfare contains. There are also video games where players roleplay as police playing against players roleplaying criminals.[51] This performative display of childhood games like "cops and robbers" simulates an aspect to policing, on that invokes an action movie, but falls short in displaying the transactive economies police participate in and curtail the mundane hour

to hour shifts actual police officers can have. Still, playing these games is a complicit act that promotes the protective arms of a capitalistic state; and again, the player might not know they are performing such an act.

The fact that players are usually not aware that they may be complicit in strengthening these indefinite modes of power through their willingness to participate in a simulated experience showing policing in a positive and entertaining light is seemingly due to what Frederic Jameson calls reification and displacement. Jameson presents his theory of reification stating it is "the way in which, under capitalism, the older traditional forms of human activity are instrumentally reorganized and 'taylorized,' analytically fragmented and reconstructed according to various rational models of efficiency."[52] Reification is another way of describing the alienation that occurs under capitalism, but instead of people, it is the activities a populace engages with, primarily their media. The reorganization is a breakdown of aesthetics to create alternate interpretations. Once the media is reorganized to become a model of efficiency, being able to be repeated, then displacement occurs. Displacement is described by Jameson as "something like 'recognition' of that content which expresses itself in the form of denial, forgetfulness, *slip, mauvaise foi*, displacement, substitution, or whatever."[53] In displacing aesthetic interpretations there is a disconnected feeling to the material being displayed in an almost simulated reality being shown that could invoke an uncanniness. While displacement's effect can be similar to cognitive estrangement, displacement is meant to be used as a manipulation tactic on the broader public to consume media efficiently while cognitive estrangement is based solely on personal affective response. The key word is manipulation. Thus, when I argue that players are not complicit in strengthening control societies, it is because they are manipulated to repeatedly play a game that is reified and, in turn, are displaced from being able to recognize the manipulation

tactics being used. This understanding leads to an acceptance of the protective arms of a capitalistic state within job simulator games that position players as members of that group. These tenets and their methods of promoting efficiency and manipulation reinforce the continual promotion of capitalism and its ideology creating a Marxian framework to analyze job simulator games.

Potential Labor in Simulated Capitalism

Before I conclude this introduction, there is one more question regarding job simulator games, and that is why do players work in a video game? As stated before, video games are meant to be entertaining, and while the prospect of simulating a job that a player may never have the chance to enact and observe could be entertaining, the labor that occurs offers no real-world monetary benefit. Cameron Kunzelman defines and uses the term "potential labor" to describe simulated work in his book T*he World is Born From Zero*. Potential labor, he says, is a process where in video games "these mechanics-as-labor ask us to turn ourselves into workers for economies, situations, and contexts that do not exist."[54] The mechanics-as-labor, he mentions relates to how "games that ask their players to do work, to literally perform the same actions as a worker within the game, are demanding that those player[s] take on the subject position of a particular form of worker."[55] In other words, Kunzelman is describing the supposed value in playing job simulator games. Coupled with the first-person position that makes up a job simulator game, the subjectivity in Kunzelman's claim lends itself specifically to jobs where the player participates in the labor and can observe the results of said labor. However, potential labor can only occur in spaces that do not exist.

Now it can be argued that the games I analyze do exist within the real-world; anyone can become a shop owner, a thief, or a police officer. So, it seems these games do not exhibit any form of potential labor. Still, Kunzelman's concept of potential labor comes from a speculative media studies perspective highlighting science fiction games as the basis for potential labor.[56] To argue for potential labor in the games I cover, it is important to identify the speculative elements these games have. For one, the semi-narrative contexts that propel the player to work these jobs are fictionalized portrayals. They do not exist for the player. Within these games, there are cognitively estranging referents to labor. Again, these referents do exist, but not for the player at the exact moment of gameplay. The referents only help the player speculate what it may mean to work such a job. Finally, the labor produced offers nonexistent rewards in the real-world. If anything, the player loses something that may be argued against potential labor and that is their time. However, the time it takes to "work" a simulated job is another form of potential labor that signifies the active participation in work that does not exist, and the time played is not lost, it is added to job's simulation in the form of timers. These factors indicate that the contextual elements of a job simulator can exist, but the work performed does not.

Kunzelman's potential labor is essential in determining how job simulator games reinforce the capitalistic tenets I argue. He writes that "in a game centered on work… to consider those laboring relation[s] are critical inflection points for considering our own working conditions."[57] By understanding potential labor as an approach, Kunzelman makes it possible to critically analyze how real-world capitalism is simulated. Positioning the player as a worker, structuring a world around the work, and rewarding the player with digital progression, giving the player a glimpse at the possible present and future working conditions workers are or will

face. The work conducted exists literally and speculatively, but it still can influence players to accept their real-world working conditions as a video game.

The potential labor in a job simulator game does not exist, and that is the point. Call it what it is, these games offer safe spaces for a player to roleplay what it would be like to own a story, be a thief, or be police officer. It is all play. However, these statements do not discount the real-world feelings and consequences of those feelings that may affect the player. What may be joy in selling their merchandise or capturing the criminal may turn into frustration at lacking efficiency or propagating a system that is mundane or even exploitative. These games provide real-world consequences for the player who inadvertently normalizes and propagates efficient accumulation, disavowal, and the need for protective arms of the state. With this framework in place, one can critically analyze how job simulator games reinforce such capitalistic tenets that can affect players whether they realize it or not. The three games being analyzed are nowhere similar in their content or context, but the work they ask the player to perform is all based on reinforcing capitalistic systems.

Chapter 1 – *TCG Card Shop Simulator*

In the job simulator video game *TCG Shop Simulator*, developed and published by OPNeon Games in 2024, the player is the owner of a trading card shop who partakes in the buying and selling of cards, booster packs, and other types of merchandise revolving around an in-game card game called Tetramon.[1] The game's primary loop is to buy merchandise, stock the shelves, wait for customer non-player characters (NPCs) to buy the items, then work the register by scanning the merchandise and accepting payment. As a card shop owner, the player must buy the merchandise and furniture like shelves through online websites accessed through the in-game phone. While all this is occurring, customers come and go. Sometimes they remark on the prices, choosing to buy or move on from each shelf. At other times, they will come in to play Tetramon at the tables the player can buy. All these situations culminate in TCG being labeled as a retail-based job simulator that positions the player first-hand into the retail job. So, as a retail owner, your sole goal is transacting goods for monetary value at an efficient rate, which reinforces efficient accumulation.

While the game is still in "Early Access," meaning the game is being actively developed on, the retail-based gameplay is fully implemented and is what drives the player towards progression in the game's systems.[2] On the game's Steam Store page, its logline states:

> Open your own local game store. Stock shelves with the latest booster packs, or crack them and collect the cards for yourself. Set your own prices, hire staff, host events, and expand your card shop.[3]

The logline accurately describes the initial start and gameplay loop for *TCG*. When starting a new game, the player is given a semi-narrative reason why they are a card shop owner in the first place. A dialogue tells the player that they have quit their job to fulfill their dream of being TCG card shop owner and with money they have saved they can now accomplish this dream. Then,

the player is placed within an unnamed city environment with their card shop along a street. The buildings surrounding the shop seem to indicate this town's location is in the United States. However, the player can choose whether they want to use dollars or euros as their primary currency in the options menu. So, for all intents and purposes, the location is styled to be in the West. The implied location provides a reasonable belief that the game's start could transpire. Since it is in the West, then it can be assumed that the player resides in a free market economy, a usual attribute to Western society. Immediately, the player is tasked with ordering merchandise to sell. To order merchandise, the player uses their cellphone to conduct the initial transactions. On the phone, they can buy merchandise stock and retail furniture like shelves, tables, or display cases. They can also renovate and expand their shop and play their bills like rent and utilities. However, unlike other transactions, the player needs to buy a merchandising license first then stock up on booster packs and other items. The licensing prices simulate how brands have third-party shops procure their merchandise legally and sell it to the general public. So, it can be surmised that the entire goal of *TCG* is to accumulate enough money and experience to further expand the scope of the simulation.

Another aspect that affects the accumulation of merchandise, furniture and renovations is the player's shop level. The player starts at level one, and as they progress through the game daily, selling merchandise, they gain experience points that culminate in leveling up. At level one, the player can only buy basic items, but as they progress, new items, furniture, and renovations are unlocked, allowing their store to carry more types of merchandise. The same gameplay concept applies to renovations. At first, the player cannot renovate their store, but as they level up, it becomes apparent that the store needs to expand to display and sell an ever-increasing variety of merchandise. Aesthetically, having more space offers the player the ability

to design how they display products by cultivating specific areas for specific merchandise. For example, players with larger spaces can have the window area dedicated to displaying individual cards, walls for shelves displaying booster packs and boxes, and an entire room dedicated to play tables or holding surplus stock. Renovations and design become a key aspect in creating individuality in the simulated retail experience.

Once players have stocked up on merchandise, they can place items on their shelves, and set prices determined by an in-game market indicator on their phone. The prices for booster packs, boxes, and individual cards change day by day. To make a profit, players need to apply certain prices for individual items by increasing the prices to about twenty percent and rounding the number to the nearest dollar.[4] Once prices are set, the player can essentially open the store and start the day. Days are comprised of thirteen hours, from 8AM to 9PM, which equate to about twenty or so minutes in real time. Players then wait for customers to file into their store. Once open, players are tasked scan items at the register, procure their monetary amount, and either give change if the customer gives cash or input their credit card information to receive payment. As the day continues, players can be offered to trade or buy individual playing cards off customers who offer it. The prices for these cards are determined by the in-game economy and the player is tasked with either setting a price and buying the card or denying the customer. To facilitate realistic economic transactions by the player, they are constantly being rated through a review system that can be seen through their in-game phone. Over the course of the day, customers can rate the store out of five stars, and the store's average rating is automatically calculated. However, the rating system seems to not affect the amount customers who come in. It serves to only motivate the player to try and be the best card shop owner they can be.

To be the best, the game offers the player the ability to hire employees. These employees all have their own rating system that determines their speed in stocking shelves and working the register. Their rating is tied to the employee's predetermined wage. The higher the wage, the better they are at working their job. However, employees are tied to the leveling system with level ten being the minimum level the player can hire an employee. The first employee the player can hire is not great, being rated as slow in every aspect; but still, they provide the player with a form of automation relieving the player of stocking shelves or ringing up merchandise. Employees are paid their wages through the phone daily. These wages are fixed and do not change over time, nor do the employees' skills (or lack thereof) increase or decrease over time. As said before, the employee system is an automation system that fosters the simulated experience of being an owner. So, to be the best owner, the player needs to diversify their time to focus on buying merchandise.

When customers come into the shop, they walk around remarking about the prices and ultimately settling on whether to buy or reject the player's prices. The customers who walk in are varied in ethnicity and gender. A player will encounter the bearded white man with glasses, the Black customer in various clothing options from sports jacket and sweats to t-shirt and jeans, women either dressing in the same t-shirt and jeans or something sporty showing their midriff, and the white business suit-wearing customer. Another aspect to customers is the smell system. Customers can randomly come in with a greenish cloud surrounding them, indicating they smell bad. If left untreated, the player's rating will go down. So, the player is tasked with using deodorant spray they can buy to remedy this situation. The player can also buy appliances that automatically spray deodorant when a customer with the green crowd comes around. This smell system plays upon the stereotypical image of the trading card gamer who forgoes basic hygienic

cleanliness.[5] However, the limits to variation start to show after a couple minutes of play. This limit can be remedied if the player assumes that customers who look the same are actually repeated customers. Yet, customers have no names outside of the anonymous usernames that are provided on the ratings page on the phone. Since these customers are lifeless outside of the repeated emotive actions they can display at the play tables, the player can forgive these limits and opt into roleplaying these interactions.

So, the gameplay loop for TCG Card Shop Simulator is as follows: the player buys merchandise licenses and stock, then places items on their shelves or in their display cases, then they set their prices as determined by the in-game economy, if they have the levels and money, they can renovate their shop and arrange it to their liking or hire employees to automate the work, then they open the shop, interacting with customers and making business transactions, and then finally once the day's end has been reached, they can close up the shop, receive their statistics for that day determining if the player lost, gained, or broke even on their transactions, and then start all over again. All the while, the player pays daily rent, utilities, and employee wages. This gameplay loop continues till the player stops playing. *TCG Card Shop Simulator* has no end.

Still, the question remains how *TCG* reinforces efficient accumulation. For starters, the game is all about the accumulation of wealth. "You have to spend money to make money" is a popular cliché used to describe simple business practices, and for Mark Fisher, the "business ontology" he references is tied to the accumulation of wealth at efficient rates.[6] Since experience is required to level up the player's shop and procure more items, and experience is tied to the amount of business transactions a player makes in a day, the game motivates the player to continuously accumulate and grow. The player can choose not to markup merchandise and sell

them at the rate they received the product, breaking even by the end of the day, but that the experience is lessened by the fact that monetary amounts affect the rate at which experience is earned. So, the player, if they do not want to waste their time, must sell merchandise at a profit to experience the game fully with the least amount of time invested. There is also the in-game economy that fluctuates without any seemingly known intervention. There is a potential result if a player consistently breaks even, they may not be able to afford the merchandise anymore, leaving them in a constant loop of debt they cannot pay off, forcing the player to quit and restart.

The simulated aspects of *TCG* are not wholly representative of card shop ownership, but there are aesthetic allegorical elements.[7] First and foremost, the player is not given an energy meter of some kind dictating the effort the player gives. They are always as alert in-game from the beginning to the end of the day and the subsequent day after as they are from the start of the game. There is also the system in which stock is delivered. Players that order merchandise receive their items immediately. These game mechanics are not representative, but they are allegorical to the ideal shop owner. The aesthetics of consistent alertness and immediate deliveries provide an interpretation that the game's world operates with efficiency in mind. If the player is not efficient enough, they can quit and restart their game. The allegorical aspects of quitting the game and restarting allude to businesses that fail and are foreclosed upon, only for the owner to start again somewhere else. There is no indication that the player was a former card shop owner at the beginning of a new game. They are given the same semi-narrative text indicating their origin. It can be interpreted that the player quit their job as owner of a failing card shop to fulfill their dream of owning a successful card shop, but this is reaching without any specific evidence to show this interpretation. The game's world restarts at the moment the player deletes their save file and starts up a new file. This action is done automatically, leading to an

interpretation that the developer wants the player to exist in one world as though their business cannot fail. This lack of failure is allegorical to a real-world failure relieved by the developer, intending the game to be replayed if failure occurs, causing its simulated aspects to be mitigated into purely a video game. Yet, the resulting failure is also simulated.

The conflict between *TCG*'s simulated and gamified aspects lead to cognitive estrangement regarding the player's interactions with the game. The cognitive knowledge of real-world economic policies like foreclosure and bankruptcy and the estranging referents of complete restarts align with how businesses and owners can continue to fail and still facilitate restarts with branding and new locations.[8] The cognitive estrangement continues to the uncanniness in customer interactions. No customer has a personality, and while this can be argued is a limit of the game's engine, it is reductive to make such a claim. The lack of personality reflects how businesses see their customers. They are merely a means to have profitable ends. Customers who only window shop and do not buy the players merchandise or buy one or two items can be interpretated as poor or burdensome as the player's action to profit is lessened on the profit side, leading to frustration. Customers who buy an exorbitant number of products will be praised and welcomed back. All these reactions signal an affective connection between player and gameplay which will be covered later, but the important aspect is how the player roleplays these situations. The roleplay serves as a method to enhance cognitive estrangement because the player knows the NPC customers will not respond and that is a complete disregard of the simulated aspects of retail work. Yet, the player is given the freedom to respond however they like, creating stories and behaviors as though they are working in the retail industry. This connection between simulation and real-world actions has a consequence where these two worlds become blended due to the allegorical aesthetic elements being shown as

simulated elements in a first-person perspective. This effect occurs with the NPC employees as well. The cognitive estrangement occurs if the player understands, as Galloway states, that "in the end, machines really have no need for humans at al all."[9] The NPCs are the end goal for the player to have automation occur; thus, they inhabit the world as an owner viewing the results of their management. The player ultimately relies upon NPCs for business transactions which will repeat. This representation occurs because the business ontology is cyclical, and by promoting this, the game's simulated aspects are forced to adhere to accumulation practices with efficiency being the standard.

Still, the potential labor of TCG is interesting to take note of. Players do not gain any real-world training by playing the game. It can be generally stated that working as a shop owner is not just ordering merchandise, setting prices, hiring employees, and working the cash register. The labor the game involves the player is, in a way, gamified to perhaps promote the idea of becoming an owner. There are no methods of promoting the player's shop. The game is already coded for NPCs to arrive and buy things. The tangibility of the player's labor does not exist if one does not consider the player's real-world time being exhausted. With Kunzelman's focus within potential labor being the theory of immaterial labor, he writes of "the memetic forms of "entrepreneurship" and the "rise and grind" mentality operate through… the traditional labor market."[10] These mentalities operate from the belief that there is "no time wasted." Players in *TCG* can argue that their time is not wasted because they are learning how to transact business for a future endeavor; that the game provides entrepreneurship. Yet, fifteen to twenty minutes equating to thirteen-hour workdays is completely irrational in any comparison. The game seems to promote that such grinding is necessary to be successful, if you are efficient.

This efficiency plays upon the player's emotions in particular ways. As stated earlier, when players roleplay their interactions they have NPC customers, this can lead to frustration or joy depending on the observable transactive results. It is important to note that affective response from the player is due to the transactive elements the game promotes. The subjective experience that is thrusted upon the player is only based within the card shop they own, and since there is no multiplayer elements, the player is the sole operator within the card shop.[11] They must function as efficiently as possible to progress within a self-determined timeframe of play and the in-game days' time limit. Here the connection between stress and play can be significant. The game seems slow paced at first as customers trickle in, but as some come to the register, others will ask the player for trades. All the while, the player must monitor customer reactions to their prices and make sure the shelves are stocked. A line can build up and the expected efficiency of the player turns into a game of catch-up. However, a player may feel the entirely opposite roleplaying themselves as an apathetic owner. This type of roleplay is not viable to the game's progression system. At once, many feelings can be allegorical to real-world retail experiences. Thus, a connection between simulation and reality is achieved through affect.

These connections are ultimately what promote a critical understanding between *TCG* and real-world capitalist efficiency in accumulation. The game dictates success based on efficient progression as indicated by the leveling system. The allegorical aesthetics presented cause the player to interact and act within the bounds of retail work though it is a simulation. The bounds of that retail work are cognitively estranging since the work is potential labor used to heighten the player's feelings through affective transactive gameplay. Thus, *TCG*'s gameplay loop is what fosters and reinforces efficient accumulation.

Chapter 2 – *Thief Simulator 2*

The act of disavowal and co-operation with capitalism is throughout the gameplay in *Thief Simulator 2*. Developed by CookieDev with Ultimate Games S.A., it is a sequel to Thief Simulator, expanding upon the series' first game by giving the player more tools to use, more valuables to steal, and adding more locations for the player to conduct thievery in. The basic premise for the game is expressed in its logline stating, "Learn skills, collect tools, and become a master of the thieving trade!"[1] As the title aptly suggests, the game allows for the player to break into houses and other private establishments to steal their valuable contents. These contents can be anything from kitchen knives and toasters to art pieces and flat-screen televisions. While stealing, the player gains experience points that contribute to the player's overall level, with level-ups securing the player skill points to spend on ability upgrades or the ability to procure better tools to access level-dependent houses or businesses they can steal from. The two neighborhoods the player can steal from are situated as open-world areas where the player can drive their car around and "case the joints" they will steal from. Casing is a multistep step process. The player can go up to a house and spy on the NPC residents and determine the number of residents including pets within the house, their schedules like when they sleep or leave, and ways of entry that do not require lockpicking or using a crowbar to break in. However, players have access to a safehouse where they can log onto a website that allows them to buy info on the houses they can steal from. This info can bypass the initial casing the player can perform, but the info can also show the player where high-priced valuables are. With this information, the player is ready to start thieving.

While breaking into a house, the player has to account for the residents' schedules, their noise level, the amount of items they have stolen (the more items they procure, the more likely

they will make noise walking), the security systems the residents may have, how many doors are left open (residents can become suspicious if doors are found open, making them prone to deviate from their schedule), and as they leave, the player has to make sure other pedestrians or cars around do not see them. If the player is found out, the resident will call the police who immediately arrive at the scene. The player can choose to hide in the house by stationing themselves in a closet, under the bed, or in a garbage bin or they can run away from the crime scene. The police, if the player is in the line of sight, will be pursued until the player breaks the line of sight; if they are unable to lose the police, they will be tased and caught. The game screen freezes to allow the player the option to reload a save or go to jail. If they choose to load a save, the game restarts to the moment before the burglary is committed. If they choose to go to jail, they are placed in a jail cell within the neighborhood. The player loses all the items they stole, but they can break out of the prison or pay bail. If they are caught while escaping jail, the cop points their gun at the player and the game screen freezes, only giving them the option to reload a save or quit the game. While the game offers the player to make multiple saves, the game continually warns the player that the autosave system promotes only one game file, potentially causing the player to lose their main save if they don't back it up with a manual save.[2]

There are multiple worlds which have multiple locations for the player to commit thievery. The two main neighborhoods Madison St. and Hillville with Madison St. having the most houses to burglarize and Hillville having the hardest ones. Both neighborhoods represent the suburban American town with an almost idyllic attitude. Madison St. represents a middle to upper-middle class neighborhood while Hillville represents communities filled with mansions and villas, a "rich" neighborhood, so to speak. Madison St. has a variety of different types of houses from single room trailers and one bedroom/one bath starter homes to two-story houses

with multiple bedrooms and baths. All these houses are filled with a variety of items that seem to be placed randomly outside of the valuable items that are distinct to one house. For example, there is a house with a doom prepper-type resident whose basement holds manufactured weapons that can be stolen and sold. While there is a slight variety in these houses regarding their layouts, their aesthetics all match almost as though the developer only changed the layout and not the actual furnishings within these homes. There are also heists the player can commit which are in resorts, warehouses, museums, banks, and even a shooting range. These heists play like regular burglaries but are situated in a single location with no means of escape. As mentioned earlier, the player also has access to a safehouse. Here, the player can sell items at a lower rate than from a fence, access their computer for tools, housing information, side missions, and sell items as a group for better pay. They can also practice lockpicking and hacking, and they can upgrade their clothes to provide noise reduction.

While upgrades can be earned in the safehouse, the player becomes a more abled thief through the skill update system. Players receive experience from stealing items and selling them to the fence. After they reach a level, the player can use a skill point to upgrade or earn tools. They can receive lock picking tools, a stethoscope for breaking into safes, agility to climb up vines, speed upgrades, and various upgrades to reduce detection. However, these skill upgrades are tied to the player's level. So, the player must grind through parts of the game by repeatedly stealing from the same houses till they can afford the skill upgrades that allow them then to burglarize other houses.

Skill upgrades and tool acquirement are also tied to a semi-narrative plot the game places the player in. The game begins with the player escaping from their former safehouse from the first game. The reason for this situation is explained by an unnamed character who calls the

player telling them that they pissed off the wrong people and a cartel is after them.[3] The player is given tasks to complete which help them level and eventually acquire certain techniques and tools to progress the story. There is also an option for the player to start a new game in "Freemode," disregarding the story for the player to operate in the world as though it were a truly open-world sandbox. Still, the player would have to gain experience and level up to progress to steal from more difficult houses just like in the story mode.

There is also a day and night cycle with an associated calendar system. The day and night cycle simulates the twenty-four day and affects the residents' schedules and how many pedestrians or cars are on the streets. The calendar system also simulates the days, weeks, and months as days pass. Each day and week can have specific effects that either benefit or cause detrimental effects for the player. For example, the first week the player starts is considered "Burglar Awareness Week." This effect causes residents and pedestrians to be more prone to seeing the player and calling the police. There is also "Parade Day" where residents leave their houses in the middle of the day to attend a parade that is not in the neighborhood, leaving houses open to easily steal from. However, the day and night cycle and calendar system do not affect the story mode in any way, allowing the player to accomplish their goals at their own pace.

So, the gameplay loop in *Thief Simulator 2* is as follows: players assume the role of a thief who uses tools to break into houses that progress over a sustained curve of difficulty; they steal from these houses a variety of items up to the limit of their backpack's threshold amount, then they take these stolen items to a fence to sell them; they gain experience from items stolen and sold, then use the skill points the received to enhance themselves and use the money to buy better tools to access more difficult houses. This series of actions are the core gameplay loop that simulates what life as a thief can be. While the representation of thieving may be conflicted, its

allegorical aesthetics properly simulate the first-hand position of the player who observes and acts within the results of their criminal actions. Being a first-person perspective, allowing the player to only see their hands in the act of burglarizing these homes, sets the player to believe they are the ones committing the act. This is due in part to the affective responses of embodiment, placing the player as the thief almost getting caught and then plundering a house of their riches to sell off. There is a rush of adrenaline that is attained since the player is having a singular subjective experience. They are told that this is their job, their life's work. The player would not question such a role as the developers simulate every aspect, outside of hunger, thirst, and sleep, of what it would be like being a thief. Still, there are cognitively estranging referents that can seemingly disconnect the player from this simulated experience. The cognitively knowable is the ability to steal items, make money, and be arrested for those crimes. The unknowable that leads to estrangement is how the police handle your initial crimes and the repeated residents' schedules throughout the day and night cycle. Now, it is important to note that the player character's skin color is white, which leads to a cognitive estranging question asking what if the player's character was Black? Would the police handle the criminal in the same way, tasering them and then arresting them? It can only be assumed that this series of events would not occur. Still, police will shoot at the player if they attempt to run away via their car. If they are shot, the player will bleed out and die leading to reloading the saved game. Yet, one aspect of *Thief Simulator 2* that holds a place in this thesis is its involvement with Fisher's concept of disavowal.

The disavowing actions in *Thief Simulator 2* is simply the act from stealing from the residents' homes. The player is not given any back story about these residents other than the assumptions one can make based on the items they own. The lacking narrative surrounding these

residents implies that they are only known for their ownership, and the player is tasked to relieve them of that ownership for the good of the criminal, or a more positive title like the underdog. In a way, Thief Simulator tries to implement a "Robin Hood-like" characterization where the player is stealing from the rich; however, they are not giving back to the poor. There are no poor people in the game's world. Everyone is either a resident or a business owner. Even the player themselves owns a safehouse. The act of disavowing capitalism in *Thief Simulator 2*, is already co-opted by capitalism. First, the player must sell the items they stole to progress through the game. While they are adding to the supposed black market, that market operates within the buying and selling of capital at a rate. Players are given the option to steal items the fence places special interest in, implying there are market factors that raise and lower the prices of items. Yet, the player is disconnected from this market having no effect on how prices are managed. They seem to change randomly. As for the jail system, capital is fundamental to resolving criminal behavior. While the player can break out of jail, the simpler choice is just paying bail. Yes, at first, this can be a detriment to the player, but when the player has leveled up extensively and made a simple mistake that landed them in jail, by that time, they would be able to afford the minimal bail price and leave. There are no other consequences for being jailed other than items and time lost. This precorporation of the judiciary system is inherent in real-world capitalism which will be discussed in the next chapter, but the act of buying and selling one's jail sentence shows the inherent cooperation between capitalism and disavowing crime. Regardless of the consequences the player may have, the gameplay loop requires the player to steal. In this way, the player acts within Fisher's understanding that, for the player in-game and out, "if the Real is unbearable, *any* reality [they] construct must be a tissue of inconsistencies." In terms of the simulated experience, the player does not see how the disavowing act of stealing is what

capitalism requires within the reality they are in. These cognitive estranging referents are the inconsistencies that cement the player into the simulated fantasy. There are not real-world consequences in *Thief Simulator 2*, but because of the allegorical elements these consequences can translate to real-world beliefs that stealing is an act of revolt against capitalism when in fact it is a cooperation between individual and capitalistic entities. The actions performed by the player in-game and the corporate capitalist are the same, except for the matter of position. The player as thief is below the capitalist, but capitalist needs the thief to show the wrong society has been driven to. Certainly, Jameson's theory of reification comes into play as the act of burglary within capitalism can be manipulated into something recognized as only committed by the lower classes as opposed to the exploitative practices capital inherently holds.[4] It is true that games where the player assumes a criminal offer critical outlooks on capitalism's actions, but within *Thief Simulator 2*, the player is given an open-world to commit crime, thinking they are disavowing capitalism.[5] In fact, they are actually furthering its success and driving people towards the need for capitalism to protect and secure their wealth.

Nowhere in the game does the player have the ability to revolt, upset, then overthrow the capitalistic market. While the player commits acts of disavowal in stealing from the rich or banks, they send those products back into the market and use their money to propagate the cyclical nature of capitalism. The consistency that could be deemed as inconsistencies between thievery and business practices is a form of cooperation between the player and the system. Fisher's "Real" is then affected by the affective emotions the player has connecting their reality to the game's simulated reality causing cognitive estrangement; thus, allowing the capital to precorporate the player as a willing participant in emboldening and cementing capitalism as the only system worth acting in.

Chapter 3 – *Police Simulator: Patrol Officers*

The simulated aspects of policing usually act as a rule set for the players to follow, but within *Police Simulator: Patrol Officers*, the game offers the player a chance to be the rule set for a simulated society showing how capitalism needs protective arms of the state and how the police implement such protection. While there are other games that position the player as police, *Police Simulator* is special in its ability to simulate not only the action police may face, but the mundane moments as well.[1] Released in 2022 by developer Aesir Interactive, the game positions they player into the role of a police officer in a fictional United States city called Brighton. Within this city, the player can enact the various duties a police officer is responsible for. With systems in place to guide the player into realistic engagements with the game world's citizens and criminals, players are incentivized to patrol the streets properly giving the job a certain air of positivity despite the real-world news seen by policing in the United States.

Once the player starts up a new game in *Police Simulator*, the player chooses one character pre-determined from a small roster. All these characters are different in race and gender that do not have any advantages or disadvantages over each other. This simple system of identification allows the player to choose someone that mirrors themselves. Then, the player chooses the playstyle they want the game to have. There is a simulation mode where the player must identify crimes on their own or a casual mode which has the Intuition System where players are given notifications of crimes occurring within their view. The player then begins the game properly within their precinct where their dispatch officer tells them about their responsibilities and their goals for the day. This dispatch officer fulfills a semi-narrative role, giving the player a reason to progress forward. They will update the player on new crimes to investigate and offer positive or critical opinions on their behavior and procedures. However, there is no overarching

story within *Police Simulator*. The semi-narrative is attached to the player's progression. While there is a tutorial for the player, it becomes apparent that developers want the player to be a "good" cop from reading the in-game handbook. The second paragraph in the introduction says, "my fundamental duty is to serve the community, to safeguard lives and property; to protect the innocent," and so on.[2] The player is supposed to adhere to the belief that the police are there to serve the community, and by acting as a good cop, this mandate can be accomplished.

Within the handbook, the player learns about the systems in place that incentivize the player to conduct proper procedure, going step by step in how to be a police officer. The handbook covers all the actions that a player can perform These actions are pulling over cars, frisking and searching, issuing various tickets for jaywalking, parking illegally, drug tests, and more, interviewing witnesses, issuing verbal warnings, writing reports, taking in evidence, working roadblocks and checkpoints, giving traffic orders, investigating a crime scene, and the general work of a cop working the "beat."[3] These actions are used to stop or investigate supposed crimes like various parking violations, jaywalking, drinking in public, being drunk in public, littering, a variety of traffic violations like speeding, running a red light, not using a turn signal, and more, dealing with car accidents, vandalism, larceny, drug dealing, open warrants, and fleeing suspects.[4] Each of these crimes can be dealt with in-game and when completed properly, the player is awarded Shift Points.

Shift points are rewarded to the player who performs justifiable actions, which are detailed throughout the handbook. These acts consist of policing the NPCs throughout Brighton. By giving parking or traffic tickets, managing accidents by collecting evidence and submitting accident reports, stopping people from littering or jaywalking, and stopping crimes like vehicle theft the player is awarded shift points that act as experience and facilitate how fast a player can

level up in their chosen district. The amount of shift points is determined by the types of crimes the player interacted with and how accurately the player followed the handbook when policing those crimes during their shift. Shifts are comprised of eight-hour workdays in-game which equate to about twenty minutes in real-time. Shifts can start in the morning or at night depending on the shifts available and the player's preference. As a player goes through their timed shift, those points accumulate till the shift's end. Once a shift is over, the player will not receive any more shift points if they pursue another crime. After returning to their precinct, the shift points are calculated and turned into district experience, allowing the player to level up. These level-ups allow for new tools to be acquired, new districts to be unlocked, or new crimes to be dealt with.

These districts make up the entirety of Brighton. The city is described as a vibrant community with the various districts being distinct from one another. There are three districts "with several neighborhoods, each with their own unique flair" as the game's Steam Store page promotes.[5] Each district is unique in that the buildings and streets are different. However, the NPC variety can be lackluster at times. Though, the variety of races and genders throughout the city is adequate to simulate a city's environment. When walking on patrol, the player can be greeted by these NPCs of all shapes and colors, allowing the player to greet back which gives them shift points. However, even though Brighton situates itself as an idyllic American city, there is still crime to be dealt with. I believe this description is to inspire the player to continue policing in Brighton as to keep the city's image clean and crime free.

Another system that promotes the player to make justifiable actions is the Conduct Point system. The in-game handbook claims that police are "bound by a code of conduct and laws. If they break these, they will suffer consequences;" and thus, the player is bound by the same conduct and laws.[6] The conduct system lets a player know if they have chosen an unjustifiable

act, taking away points. The player starts with one hundred points and as they commit unjustifiable actions, those points are taken away. The amount of conduct points taken away is based on how unjustifiable the action is, which accounts for the player's failure to perform the right order of operations for a certain crime. For example, if a player is performing a routine traffic stop on an NPC, they cannot draw their weapon on the suspect unless they are fleeing, or the player cannot ask them to step out of the vehicle without reasonable suspicion. If they perform those actions, the player's conduct points diminish. The player would have to first get the NPCs license and registration and then continue through the order of operations dictated by the handbook to not have any conduct points taken away. At the end of the shift, if the player's conduct points are less than one hundred, then a percentage of shift points are not collected, causing them to potentially lose experience and level-ups. These consequences limit a player's ability to perform unjustifiable acts. There are several unjustifiable actions the player can perform, like sounding the patrol car's siren for no reason to illegal searches. The most severe conduct point penalty is police brutality which is described by the handbook as unjustifiably discharging your weapon at citizens or vehicles. The consequence for losing all conduct points is being fired from the force leading to a game over screen. However, instead of locking the player out of their character, losing all their progress, the player can repeat the week they lost all their conduct points, only losing partial progress on their save file.

As mentioned earlier, all these systems rely on the gameplay choice the player chooses at the beginning of game; whether they chose the casual mode or simulation mode will directly affect the game's core loop. For the purposes of this thesis, I decided to only interact with the game's casual mode as the Intuition System is far more interesting to discuss as it relates to real-world surveillance. The Intuition System is comprised of notifications the player can receive as

they drive or walk Brighton's streets. These notifications inform the player if an NPC is breaking into a car, littering, or performing any type of crime within the player's field of view. The NPC is highlighted with their supposed crime and the player can choose whether to engage the suspect or not. In simulation mode, the Intuition System is not active, and the player must rely on their sight and knowledge of crime to accurately engage with a potential crime. Still, with both modes, the dispatch officer will let the player know about open warrants, suspected stolen cars, and other crimes around the district they are patrolling in. Once the player confronts the subject, they begin the interview process. With the Intuition System, the player is notified if the NPC is swaying while standing, if they smell like drugs or alcohol, and if their eyes are under the influence or look suspicious. The system will even let the player know if they are the suspect or not without any police work. This information helps the player accurately decipher if the NPC warrants standard procedures for a crime. However, since the Intuition System covers all crimes that can be considered small or large, the player can choose which crimes to police.

The player is given the ultimate choice whether they want to pursue certain crimes or not. The shift points awarded for dealing with crimes are not based on the severity of the crime being committed. All crimes are equal within the shift point system. For certain crimes like speeding, littering, or jaywalking, the player can issue a verbal warning rather than writing a ticket. While a ticket offers a faster turnaround for acquiring shift points, the player hardly engages with any action in the process. However, it seems that during a shift, a large amount of people litter or jaywalk, allowing for a rather quick procurement of shift points, but the downside is a mundane experience for the player. One would assume that ignoring crimes or dispatches would garner negative consequences, but there are no consequences to ignoring criminal events. The rate of crime within Brighton stays the same regardless of the player's actions.

Within *Police Simulator*, the natural gameplay loop is as follows: players begin their shift at the precinct in the district they have chosen for the week, then the patrol the streets, identifying crimes and being told where to go by the dispatch officer; when pursuing a violation, the player can give the NPC a ticket or a verbal warning, but when pursuing an investigation, the player must gather evidence by talking to or interrogating NPCs, discover physical evidence on the scene, and then make the necessary arrests; once their shift ends, the player returns to the precinct and receives their shift point total determined by the amount of crimes dealt with and how many conduct points they still have. After completing these steps, their district experience is calculated, and the player will level up, allowing them to access other districts and better tools for policing.

The simulated aspects of *Police Simulator* initially position the player in a first-person perspective allowing for embodiment to occur. With the pre-made characters and a third-person view of investigations, there can be some disconnected experiences that may deem this simulator game as lacking according to the distinction of simulation games. However, according to my definition of a job simulator game, the observation of the job's results is placed well within a third-person perspective. While the player may feel disconnected from their character, the actions they participate while patrolling are from the player and provide the necessary embodiment, even if its lessened by the third-person perspective. Still, this perspective is only shown for a fraction of the total amount of gameplay.

The allegorical aesthetics of simulating policing creates a complex situation that requires an in-depth understanding of before connecting this game to a Marxian critique. The game offers numerous connections to real-world policing without making a judgement. The Intuition System is not necessarily a surveillance system since there are not any physical systems of surveillance

being used. However, the act of a police officer being able to determine a crime within their vicinity instantly suggests that the police have systems in place that can be at least simulated, relating to real-world practices. Galloway claims that "instead of facilitating the metaphysical arrangement, the computer does something quite different: it simulates the metaphysical arrangement."[7] In other words, computers (and in this case job simulator games) do not help the user understand the abstract, they simulate it to be understood. For the Intuition System, the game does not show how surveillance is a part of a realistic police force, it simulates surveillance to promote how the system makes the job easier. A similar effect occurs with how the player reaching a game over and restarting their in-game week. If a player loses all their conduct points, they are given a game over and the ability to restart their shifts. This process is to ensure that the player is given consequences for unjustifiable actions but is not locked out of their save leading to a complete restart from the beginning. Allegorically, the simulated experience of reaching a game over, being fired from the police force, and restarting as though nothing happened, is connected to the real-world consequences most police face if caught performing unjustifiable actions. They are fired, only to return as a cop at another precinct.[8] These allegorical aesthetic elements serve to connect the simulated experience to real-life while still entertaining the player as a game first and not a stark critique of policing.

Still, the player who encounters these elements may feel the cognitive estranging effects from referents like shift points and district experience. The surveillance and save restarting provide the player with a sense of reality and simulation blending. With procuring tools for better policing, there is an implication that police are necessary within society since crime is seemingly natural to occur in society. The knowable referents shown in-game all point to how crime exists at a relatively normal rate through player's time playing. Crime is not lowered by better policing

nor is it raised if the player ignores all crimes. However, when the player receives enough experience to have better tools, then new crimes happen for the player to pursue. Cognitively, the player understands the motivation of any game is progression. Still, the unknowable referents within these examples also twist the simulated reality itself by way of allegorical aesthetic elements. Simulation games are supposed to accommodate gameplay and realism, but when the lines begin to blur, estrangement occurs, and the player must reckon with the implications that police are not wholly good for society while being told they are. They are told the police are here to serve the citizens, but what is shown in both the simulation and reality are police officers serving the people in charge and protecting the property they reside in or make money from.

The entire premise around Police Simulator is to provide a propagandistic method in reinforcing the capitalistic state's need for protective arms. Fisher uses his idea of internal control when speaking on disavowing actions, but *Police Simulator* implements such control when promoting police work to the player. This promotion becomes effective when tied to Jameson's understanding of displacement, or the act of creating new modes of recognition for the player.[9] *Police Simulator* tries to promote that police are upstanding citizens that have joined the force to protect citizens; they are greeted as they walk the street because they are appreciated. However, a couple hours of gameplay show that the police are always at odds with the NPC citizens. For example, during a car accident investigation, the player needs to gather word-of-mouth evidence from NPC witnesses. When talking with these NPCs, they all were "not at the scene of the accident" or they "did not see the accident" when it happened.[10] This becomes frustrating for the player as these situations often repeat themselves. The player is then positioned against the citizens, opting for antagonistic play. This position forces a change in affect from a good-natured cop to one that sees the city as a breeding ground for crime causing

unjustifiable actions to seem more justifiable to deal with the city's crime issues. The "us versus them" mentality continues as to the question of who these NPC citizens are becomes unanswerable since hardly any background is given to these NPCs. There is no acknowledgement of their class in society. Still, there is an implication that crime revolves around society's lower-class members, especially in video games.[11] Then, it can be assumed that crimes in *Police Simulator* are only committed by NPCs of the lower class. Thus, the police are simulated as though they are protectors of the upper class including their property.

As explained before, the main crimes in *Police Simulator* revolve around property and the issuing of fines. Crimes like vandalism or car accidents deal with property. For the most part, these crimes are handled by issuing ticketed violations that are paid for by money. The police's job is to protect property and serve the people, but with no other knowledge about the NPCs encountered, it can be assumed that property the player is protecting is not connected with any NPCs they come into contact. In a way Fisher recognizes how the player and the NPC are in debt with each other within the job simulator's gameplay. Both "pay for [their] own exploitation" as Fisher writes.[12] The player needs the NPC criminals, and the criminals need the player so that gameplay can occur. Both pay for the ability to and be exploited by each other. However, the power dynamic is already in place by the substantial growth in policing techniques the player acquires through playing the game as intended. The game alludes to this relationship through a propagandistic understanding that without the police the world would fall into chaos. However, this understanding is not the case regarding *Police Simulator*'s gameplay as players can ignore the crimes and the city is not worse off. The only chaos and conflict created is through the police. Yet, in the game's simulation, the ever-present allegory of realistic elements promotes the need for protective arms for the capitalistic state.

Conclusion

By positioning the player in a first-hand experience, the job simulator genre allows a player to act within the role of a specific job existing in today's world. While it does not train a person on how or why they should take on such a job, these games do reinforce certain economic and social tenets that promote capitalism. The methods to achieve this result are through an allegorical connection between in-game and real-world aesthetics, creating an affective connection between player and gameplay loops, the cognitive estranging referents that cement disconnection into displacement, and culminate in a player knowingly or unknowingly adhering to efficient accumulation, disavowing acts, and a need for protective arms of the state. However, are the developers intending such results?

Now, it is understandable not to think or discuss the developer's intentions when creating these games, going with a formalist method. However, when playing *Police Simulator*, one of the splash screens at the start, when the game is loading, makes a statement saying that this game was created by people of all colors, genders, and faiths, and that their intent was to provide a game that sought to realistically simulate the work.[1] The question of intention immediately should be discussed because if the game is not trying to promote capitalism or show a bias for certain jobs, is it the real-world system imposed on the player that causes such connections and disconnections to occur? Perhaps other forms of discussion are needed to gain any more insight into the effect capitalism has on the games we create and play.[2]

The scope of this thesis only covers the games mentioned, but the job simulator genre is vast in material. From polished simulators like *Euro Truck Simulator* (SCS Software 2012) to cheap, asset flip job simulator games, there are many more games to cover that reinforce capitalistic tenets both in and outside of the game's world. I have provided a short list of the

games relating to the subgenre of each game that can be studied in the future. There are also games that simulate jobs and the life around those jobs within a full narrative that promotes progression while telling a story like in *Hobo: Tough Life* (Perun Creative 2021). This game also has staunch critiques of capitalism which, if it were included would have entire section dedicated to the criticisms of capital in video games, then this section would lead to the specifics on how job simulator games critique capitalism in disavowal. Still, at the time of writing this thesis, many more games like *Schedule I* (TVGS 2025) have released to overwhelming praise, yet reviewers leave out how the game criticizes the systems to allow for drug dealing to occur. Through close readings of these games, along with postmodern theories, the conversation over job simulator games can help us see the ever-present tendrils of capitalism within our modes of entertainment and relaxation.

Notes

Preface

1. “Steam Store Page.” *Satisfactory*. Developed by Coffee Stain Studios (Coffee Stain Publishing, 2024), https://store.steampowered.com/app/526870/Satisfactory

2. This narrative is shown in-game and is spoken by the AI Ada. While it is not exactly worded that way, the implication is shown throughout the gameplay.

3. The “explore and exploit” phrase is repeatedly said and shown as a part of FICSIT’s goals for pioneers to engage with. Being called a pioneer while being told to explore and exploit is the satire employed by CookieDev that creates humor.

4. “Ada Voicelines” in *Satisfactory*. Developed by Coffee Stain Studios (Coffee Stain Publishing, 2024)

5. “Break Messages” in *Satisfactory*

6. “Break Messages” in *Satisfactory*

Introduction

1. There are many more games that are within the job simulator genre that reinforce the capitalistic tenets that will be covered. For the scope of this thesis, I have limited the games down to these three. One only needs to take a look at Steam’s “Simulation Games” section.

2. These games are not being only played by a niche community. There are thousands of streams and YouTube videos for job simulator playthroughs where the content creator entertains their audience by role playing the job.

3. An example of this is from content creator Criken playing the game *Fast Food Simulator*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEwMjoO33tE. Here, they all try and embody the role of fast-food workers, leading to comedic reactions and events. It is important to note that the

game does not offer the sense it is being comedic, it is made that way by the players' interactions within the game.

4. When putting together the research for this thesis, I gave a presentation on this thesis topic. There was a comment asking what the difference between a job simulator and a game like *Hitman* is; wouldn't that be considered a game where you simulate the hitman job, and to an extent they were right. So, a distinct definition needed to be formed to resolve this issue.

5. Patrick Crogan and Joshua Jarret. "Simulation Games." *Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming [3 Volumes]*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf (2021), 932

6. The generality of simulation games allows for any game to be studied and put up against the Marxian framework this thesis is building. However, for its scope, the thesis requires making the distinction between simulation games and job simulators.

7. Crogan and Jarret, "Simulation Games," 932

8. There are numerous management games that have a disembody player use interface controls to see the results of their actions. Genres like Real-Time and Turn-Based Strategy Games have players controlling armies or individual units. Games like *The Sims* (Maxis 2000) have players controlling families and individuals in the "Sim-life" genre.

9. Crogan and Jarret, "Simulation Games," 934

10. Jagoda, Patrick. *Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), xiv https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226630038.001.0001

11. Jagoda, *Experimental Games*, xiv

12. The generality comes from the fact that if a game has no objects to interact with it, it may as well be an art piece to be viewed, but I am not comparing games to art. Still, viewing can

be seen as a form of interaction. What I mean is the simulated aspects to video games require objects because outside of a simulated environment, in the real world, there are objects.

13. The nudging used by Jagoda is not physical. A game's simulation is only as believable as it relates to the player's sense of reality. Developers walk a fine line between both sides of this figurative coin, giving a world enough detail that simulate and even speculate the player's worldly senses. The nudging in either direction pushes the bounds of what can be developed.

14. Bogost, Ian. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (The MIT Press, 2006), x, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/6997.001.0001.

15. Identifying objects as meaning makers follows a formalist approach to critical engagement in game studies. Not only do the rule sets tell us about a game, objects can help determine critical literary features.

16. Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 5.

17. It does not matter if the transactive process deals in fictional currencies, the process of buying and selling anything places the game in a market economy and requires a look into the economic systems within the game.

19. "Embodiment, n." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, March 2025), https://www.oed.com/dictionary/embodiment_n.

20. For a more in-depth study on the basics in game studies see Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 2005.

21. I do not make any references to narrative as another motivating factor within the introduction as I believe narrative in these job simulator games are sidelined for an economic

narrative of increased profits over time to sustain that type of motivating aspect. Economic narrative will come later in the introduction when talking about Fisher's work.

22.

23. Anable, Aubrey. *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018) xviii

24. Anable, *Playing with Feelings*, xviii

25. Considering Anable's understanding of affect, I developed my definition in response to the feelings that are promoted from job simulator games.

26. Anable, *Playing with Feelings*, 9

27. I will not be covering the term play in this thesis as it is assumed that play is understood as the interactions within a game's world. There are many foundational texts on play. see Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 2005.

28. Anable, *Playing With Feelings*, xx

29. When playing *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix 2005) with my friends in 2005, seeing how actual guitar players could not "get" how to play the game was an interesting observation. I saw this with many rhythm-style games. However, it is also interesting to see how sports players respond to the sporting genre of video games. I casually have seen many athletes play these games as a hobby. Yet, this may not have anything to do with the representation issues I talk about as they may at times embody an athlete in a game, but overall are embodying the interactions associated with coach, a part of the management system being simulated.

30. Galloway, Alexander R. *The Interface Effect* (Polity, Cambridge, UK, 2021), 45.

31. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 23

32. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 23

33. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 20

34. Chu, Seo-Young. *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?: A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation*. (Harvard University Press, 2010) 5, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjghw79

35. Anable's criticism of Galloway is correct when referring to how affect creates collectivism in *Working with Feelings*, but I hope that through remediation of affect and interface as being connected through player experiences, visuals and code can create singular affective experiences that can be shared amongst a group.

36. Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009) 2

37. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 4

38. I will admit that there are other forms of economic systems within the world. For the limited scope of this thesis, I'll maintain that this statement only comes from the experience of living in the United States. However, the job simulators this work focuses on are based within the United States or a general European Union city.

39 Marxists Internet Archive. "Capital." *Marxists Internet Archive Glossary*, (2025) https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/c/a.htm#capital.

40 Live service games may fit this concept as well, monetizing a player's time with daily activities and month-to-month season passes where items may be lost if not acquired during the pass's duration.

41. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 17

42. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 55

43. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 14

44. While this kind of statement seems reductive, especially considering that while buying video games in general is supporting capitalism, it does lend support to developers seeking to provide speculative pathways towards other economic systems, the buying of games still supports Fisher's statement that there is no alternative to capitalism.

45. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 15

46. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 9

47. Fisher uses the examples of Nirvana's frontman Kurt Cobain and Hip-Hop as a genre that tries to separate themselves from the system, but are fundamentally cogs in capitalism's machine, 9

48. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 12

49. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 22

50. see *America's Army* (US Army, 2002) and the *Call of Duty* Franchise (Infinity Ward, 2003).

51. see "DarkRP" servers in *Garry's Mod* (Gary Newman 2006); *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013) PC RP mods and communities that use them to facilitate urban roleplay.

52. Jameson, Fredric. "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture." *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979): 130, https://doi.org/10.2307/466409.

53. Jameson, "Reification," 141

54. Kunzelman, Cameron. *The World Is Born From Zero: Understanding Speculation and Video Games* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022) 56 ,https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110719451

55. Kunzelman, *The World Is Born From Zero*, 56

56. Specifically using the game *VA-11 Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action* (Sukeban Games 2016)

57. Kunzelman, *The World Is Born From Zero*, 55

Chapter 1

1. *Tetramon* (2021) was developed by Sia Ding Shen for mobile platforms. They seem to be one of the main developers in OPNeon Games. OPNeon Games does not have a list of developers employed, so it is safe to assume *TCG Shop Simulator* was solely developed by Sia Ding Shen and used his *Tetramon* IP to perhaps promote his mobile game or simulate the game's popularity as though it was *Pokemon*.

2. Steam's Early Access period is a way for developers to procure funds for continued development while also having players perform quality assurance for their game. Most games in the job simulator genre are in Early Access with some actually releasing and still being updated.

3. *TCG Card Shop Simulator*. Developed by OPNeon Games. (Published by OPNeon Games, 2025), Video Game, https://store.steampowered.com/app/3070070/TCG_Card_Shop_Simulator

4. During my time playing the game, I wanted to know the most efficient way of selling merchandise. On a Reddit thread about the game, someone had tested and proved that a twenty percent markup, with rounding to the nearest dollar, on merchandise allowed for customers to consistently buy and remain happy with their purchase.

5. This stereotypical image was popularized by a meme image years ago that showed an overweight man at a trading card tournament with his butt crack out. There have been various threads online describing how these card tournaments are known to have a "smell" to them

causing organizers to implement rules that require basic hygienic cleanliness to participate in these tournaments.

6. see my "Introduction on Capitalistic Tenets," Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

7. see my "Introduction on Allegory," Galloway, *The Interface Effect*.

8. These games forego foreclosure and bankruptcy with a "game over" screen that does not speculate on the future of the store, but only serves to allow the player to restart.

9. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 22.

10. Kunzelman, *The World Is Born From Zero*, 59-60

11. Other retail-type job simulator games have multiplayer, and one day TCG may have it as well, even though their roadmap does not include this. In multiplayer situations, players tend to perform a master-slave dynamic where one player takes on the role as owner and the other as remedial employee. However, both players have the same abilities. This is not always the case. Still, in most multiplayer job simulator situations but the work is divided between the two to foster efficient accumulation. Many Twitch streams and YouTube videos show this dynamic taking place.

Chapter 2

1. *Thief Simulator 2*. Developed by CookieDev and Ultimate Games S.A.. (Published by PlayWay S.A., 2023), Video Game, https://store.steampowered.com/app/1332720/Thief_Simulator_2

2. I think it is important to note the saving features in job simulators because it offers an intentionality behind the "one character, one life" concept that is inherent it most job simulator games. If a player were to have multiple save files for individual personas, then the allegory to real-life would be diminished. For *Thief Simulator* and its sequel, the ability to have multiple

saves, I believe, is to lessen the frustration of a burglary gone wrong and a potential soft lock from occurring and halting progress.

3. It can be assumed that this cartel that is after the player is from the previous entry in the series.

4. See Jameson, Fredric. “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture.” *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979), https://doi.org/10.2307/466409.

5. Some other games like *Anonymous Hacker Simulator* and various drug dealer simulators have the player partake in criminal organizations to make the world a better place or a better place for themselves, usually falling into the latter eventually. These games operate from the understanding that capitalism exists, and the player needs to take back their independence and “do something about it.” Usually this ends up with the player trying to make money to take on bigger and better opportunities. No where does the game allow the player to change the system that benefits everyone.

Chapter 3

1. Games like *Ready or Not* (Void Interactive 2023) and *Bodycam* (Reissad Studios 2024) allow players to embody swat police in taking down criminals, but they only focus on the action elements of police work, opting for simulated gunplay rather than simulated work.

2. “Handbook.” *Police Simulator: Patrol Officers*. Developed by Aesir Interactive. (Published by Astragon Entertainment, 2022) Video Game.

3. “Handbook,” *Police Simulator: Patrol Officers*

4. “Handbook,” *Police Simulator: Patrol Officers*

5. “Steam Store Page.” *Police Simulator: Patrol Officers*. Developed by Aesir Interactive. (Published by Astragon Entertainment, 2022) Video Game https://store.steampowered.com/app/997010/Police_Simulator_Patrol_Officers

6. “Handbook,” *Police Simulator: Patrol Officers*

7. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 20

8. see Kelly, Kimbriell, et al. "Fired/Rehired: Police Chiefs Are Often Forced to Put Officers Fired for Misconduct Back on the Streets." *The Washington Post*, (2017): www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/investigations/police-fired-rehired,

9. see Jameson, Fredric. “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture.” *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979): https://doi.org/10.2307/466409.

10. All these interactions occur within the game and the voice lines the player hears is randomized.

11. see King, Alexander, “Defund the SimCity Police” edited by Gareth Damian Martin. *Heterotopias* 009 (September 2022) https://www.heterotopiaszine.com.

12. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 26

Conclusion

1. *Police Simulator* begins with a splash screen automatically shows up giving the player a message. This occurs every time the game starts.

2. see Patterson, Christopher B. *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games* (New York University Press, 2020)

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