

The "Pleasure Governance" of Ludocapitalism—How Enjoyment Becomes a Disguise for Exploitation

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary digital games have evolved into a key arena for capital accumulation and new forms of exploitation. Their core mechanism lies in transforming players' pleasurable experiences into a covert instrument of exploitation through what this study terms "pleasure governance." Based on a quantitative survey of 358 valid questionnaires and in-depth interviews with 11 players of diverse profiles, this research analyzes how such governance integrates psychoanalytic, ideology critique, and biopolitical theories to program desire, colonize time, and commodify social relations. The gacha mechanism functions as a "desire programmer" that manufactures cycles of continuous engagement; mission and season systems act as "time planners" that reframe leisure into structured labor; and social display systems serve as "identity performance arenas" that drive symbolic consumption. Despite clear awareness, players remain deeply immersed, exhibiting a cynical addiction wherein the subject is recruited as an affective laborer, self-optimizer, and symbolic consumer. By modulating circuits of pleasure production, ludocapitalism achieves a comprehensive colonization of life-time, affective energy, and social relations. There is an urgent need to explore paths of transcendence through regulation, community praxis, and critical self-reflection.

Keywords: digital games; governance of pleasure; political economy of desire; self-exploitation; control society

FROM "ADDICTION" TO "GOVERNANCE": A SHIFT IN PROBLEMATIZATION

If one day you find yourself setting an alarm for 5 a.m. solely to be the first to pull a virtual character you have never met; if you can deftly deconstruct the commercial tricks embedded in game mechanics, yet still cannot resist paying for a line of romantic dialogue written by code—then you are already immersed in a carefully orchestrated "governance of pleasure." In the narrative of Player F1 (a Genshin Impact player), she clearly recognises that game characters are perfectly packaged commodities crafted by artists, scriptwriters, and voice actors, and that those touching interactions are nothing more than algorithmic daggers aimed precisely at emotional vulnerabilities. Yet when the banner for a new character opens, she still gets up on time and presses the pull button with an almost ritualistic devotion. After several failed attempts, she describes herself as "locked outside the door," watching helplessly as "the whole world is happily playing with him." This anxiety of exclusion eventually drives her to overspend, only to be rewarded with a moment of "ecstasy" that is quickly sobered by the bank statement. Similarly, Player F5, a freelance illustrator, splurged nearly 8,000 yuan on her beloved character. She knew full well that this sum could buy a professional graphics tablet, yet she could not resist the urge to "vote with real money for love," only to fall into the absurdity and sorrow of "love being price-tagged." Player M2, an engineering student who ordinarily prides himself on being a "rational player" skilled at calculating probabilities—using spreadsheets to plan resources and formulas to assess cost-effectiveness—once the obsession of a "complete collection" takes hold, his defences collapse instantly, and he becomes a prisoner of the gambler's mindset. Afterwards, he grits his teeth and performs a financial post-mortem, as if judging another version of himself. Players see through the rules with lucidity, yet still invest themselves emotionally; they criticise the exploitative nature of the system, yet also enjoy the pleasures shaped by it.

These phenomena can no longer be simply encapsulated by the term “addiction.” Addiction implies loss of control and pathology, whereas these players remain conscious throughout; addiction suggests a passive victim, whereas they participate actively and even take pleasure in it. Digital games have become an elaborate “governance of pleasure”—by designing desires, modulating emotions, and planning behaviours, they induce players to voluntarily surrender their time, money, and emotions under the illusion of freedom and creativity. So, when pleasure becomes the disguise of exploitation, how are we to understand this gentle yet highly effective governance practice pervading the virtual world? And how does capital, through meticulously designed systems of “pleasure,” transform this profound ambivalence into a stable and sustainable form of exploitation?

For a long time, public discourse and academic research on excessive immersion in digital games have been largely framed within the pathological and individual-psychological concept of “addiction.” This discourse views players’ engagement as an individual deviation or psychological disorder that needs correction, with explanatory logics centring on reward mechanisms, self-control deficits, and neuroadaptation (Zhao et al., 2025). However, such a perspective obscures the underlying capital forces and systemic operational mechanisms. With the deepening of digital capitalism, games are no longer merely an entertainment medium; they have evolved into a complex field integrating production, consumption, social interaction, and discipline. The superposition of capital logic and digital technology has turned games into a practical arena for capital valorisation and new forms of digital exploitation, dissolving the boundary between labour and leisure, and giving rise to multiple forms of alienation—from life time to social relations.

This calls for a shift in our problematisation towards a critical examination of the economic systems and power technologies that shape such behaviours—moving from the discourse of “addiction” to an analysis of “governance.” Introducing the governance perspective means that we situate the game industry and the player behaviours it moulds within the political-economic structure and biopower mechanisms of digital capitalism. The governance apparatus of game capitalism synthesises the political-economic analysis of surplus-value extraction, the biopolitical concern with population regulation and subject formation, and the psychoanalytic insight into the dynamics of desire. It does not stop at appropriating players’ labour time; it aims to capture their attention, emotional investment, and social relations, thereby achieving a comprehensive colonisation of life time and constructing a new, immediate temporal order. Through the disguise of “pleasure,” this governance weaves exploitative relations into players’ everyday enjoyment and narratives of self-actualisation, making exploitation voluntary, immersive, and almost imperceptible. Therefore, uncovering how “pleasure” is systematically produced, distributed, and turned into an instrument of exploitation becomes a critical entry point for understanding the operational logic of contemporary digital capitalism.

In this control society, constituted by algorithms, interfaces, and interaction protocols, games are both a microcosm and a vanguard. Drawing on quantitative data from 358 valid questionnaires and in-depth interviews with 11 players of diverse types (see Table 1), this study transcends individualising explanations that simply reduce such phenomena to “addiction” and proposes an analytical framework of the “governance of pleasure.” It aims to reveal how this practice, operating under the name of “enjoyment,” functions as a concealed apparatus for value extraction and subject formation by digital capital. Critiquing it is not merely about the ethics of the entertainment industry; it is also about how, in the digital age, we can recognise and defend the possibility of human autonomy and authentic pleasure amidst highly engineered enjoyment.

Table 1 Basic Information of Interviewees

ID	Age	Gender	Location	Occupation /Identity	Primary Games Involved	Game Genre(s)
F1	22	Female	Hangzhou, Zhejiang	Design Student	Genshin Impact, Light and Night	Anime-style Open-world RPG, Dating Simulation
F2	28	Female	Beijing	Internet Company Operations	Honor of Kings, Shining Nikki	MOBA, Dress-up Collection & Raising Simulation
F3	19	Female	Chengdu, Sichuan	Liberal Arts Freshman	Mr. Love: Queen's Choice, Tears of Themis	Otome Dating Simulation, Narrative Puzzle

F4	35	Female	Shanghai	Mid-level Manager (Foreign Company)	Animal Crossing: New Horizons, Stardew Valley	Life Simulation, Farming Simulation
F5	26	Female	Guangzhou, Guangdong	Freelance Illustrator	Honkai: Star Rail, Fate/Grand Order	Anime-style Turn-based RPG, Gacha Card Collection & Raising
F6	29	Female	Changsha, Hunan	Kindergarten Teacher	QQ Dance, Candy Crush Saga	Music & Dance Social Game, Match-3 Casual Game
M1	26	Male	Shenzhen, Guangdong	Programmer	League of Legends, PUBG: Battlegrounds	MOBA, Tactical Battle Royale Shooter
M2	20	Male	Xi'an, Shaanxi	Junior Engineering Student	Naraka: Bladepoint, Honor of Kings, PUBG: Battlegrounds	Action Battle Royale, MOBA, Tactical Battle Royale Shooter
M3	33	Male	Zhengzhou, Henan	Self-employed Shop Owner	Fantasy Westward Journey, Game of Fate	Economy-focused MMORPG, Auto Battler Strategy
M4	18	Male	Heze, Shandong	High School Senior (Grade 12)	Honor of Kings, Genshin Impact, PUBG: Battlegrounds	MOBA, Anime-style Open-world RPG, Tactical Battle Royale Shooter
M5	40	Male	Tianjin	State-owned Enterprise Employee	Genshin Impact, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Honor of Kings	Open-world RPG, Open-world Adventure, MOBA

THE THEORETICAL COLLUSION OF PLEASURE, DESIRE, AND CAPITAL

Digital capital consciously integrates insights from psychoanalysis regarding the mechanisms of desire, revelations from ideology critique concerning the workings of power, and techniques from biopolitics for population governance into the design and operation of entertainment products. This marks a significant upgrade in the logic of capitalist exploitation: a shift from the appropriation of material labor-time to the colonization of immaterial realms such as affect, attention, and unconscious desire. Pleasure is no longer merely a byproduct of entertainment; it becomes the core energy that powers the operation of new control apparatuses—energy generated by desire once it has been programmed by capital. This completes a crucial leap from a psychological concept to a category of political economy.

Game Pleasure as "Objet Petit a"

In Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, he stated on multiple occasions: "The objet petit a is a function I devised to designate the object of desire; it is what Winnicott calls the transitional object." (Miller & Lacan, 2018). The objet petit a is the cause of desire, a constitutive lack that precisely drives the movement of desire. Lacan reconfigured the traditional model of subject-object relations. Upon entering the symbolic order—the world of language and social rules—the subject undergoes a primordial separation from the "Thing," leaving behind an unsymbolizable void. The objet petit a is the incarnation of this void, that part of itself from which the subject must separate in order to constitute itself. It is an "object that is differentiated from itself," representing an eternal lack, yet paradoxically serving as the reason desire takes shape and sustains itself. Therefore, the subject's desire is organized around this unfillable lack—a pursuit of the desire of the Other.

Within the symbolic order constructed by digital games, the objet petit a is concretized and becomes the engine of pleasure production. Game designers are engaged in the continuous production of desire itself, embedding the objet petit a into every dynamic node of the game's mechanics. For instance, in gacha or loot box mechanisms, the objet petit a is not entirely the ultimate rare character card—that is merely a promised, deceptive endpoint.

The true objet petit a is the decisive moment before the golden light flashes, the pure possibility and uncertainty carried by the "next attempt" (Hoens, 2013). This uncertainty itself, this anticipation forever in a state of "about-to-come," is the true cause of desire. As Lacan suggested in his interpretation of Pascal's wager, what drives action is the investment in the not-yet-revealed object as the "stake." Similarly, in open-world games, the objet petit a is the unexplored marker perpetually existing beyond the horizon; in competitive games, it is the next crucial victory that might bring promotion. Game narratives and objective systems constitute a signifying chain, while the objet petit a slips through the gaps in this chain, ensuring that the "Thing" which promises ultimate fulfillment always remains in the next quest, the next update, or the next season.

This mechanism results in a unique form of "enjoyment without exception." Lacan's concept of *jouissance* (enjoyment) is distinct from simple pleasure (*plaisir*); it encompasses pain and excess, representing a satisfaction of the drive intricately linked to a fundamental lack. Through its interactive logic, the game places the player in a continuous yet perpetually thwarted encounter with the objet petit a. The completion of each minor quest, the acquisition of each rare item, provides only a partial and temporary satisfaction, which, by confirming the existence of "more possibilities," reproduces desire (Nicoll, 2023). What the player enjoys is the repetitive cycle experienced in the process of infinitely approaching, yet never fully reaching, that empty core. The game environment constantly generates minor, accessible "little objects"—experience points, common items—to maintain the rhythm of engagement, while simultaneously suspending ultimate achievements and absolute perfection, the objet petit a as the cause of desire, just out of reach.

Therefore, examined through the psychoanalytic lens, game pleasure is a form of deferred *jouissance*, whose intensity precisely stems from the lack embodied by the objet petit a. The excitement, anxiety, yearning, and momentary satisfaction experienced by the player collectively constitute the interactive field between the game's symbolic system and desire. The theoretical end of the game, which would bring a temporary cessation of desire, is precisely what ludocapitalist economics seeks to avoid. Consequently, we see design logic dedicated to infinitely postponing "completion," through level cap increases, expansion packs, seasonal resets, and endless collectibles. All these strategies serve one purpose: to ensure the objet petit a as the cause of desire remains perpetually operational. In this sense, the game transcends the category of mere entertainment product; it is a modern apparatus operating at the junction of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. It mimics and appropriates the fundamental structure of human desire, taming the subject's eternal quest for lack into a predictable, quantifiable, and sustainable form of engagement and consumption.

Cynicism and "Willing" Submission

To deeply understand the phenomenon of "conscious immersion"—where players continue to invest time and resources despite their clear awareness of the underlying commercial logic of game design—Slavoj Žižek's ideology critique, developed from Lacanian psychoanalysis, and particularly his discussion of cynical ideology, sheds light on the mechanisms of power in contemporary consumer society. For Žižek, cynicism represents the "postmodern" form of ideology, whose core paradox lies in the fact that "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it" (Stavrakakis, 2021). The subject is fully aware of the reality concealed beneath the social appearance of promises of freedom, fairness, and fun in games—namely, algorithmic manipulation, addictive design, and profit-driven motives. Yet, this knowledge does not lead to resistance or alienation; instead, it becomes a condition for deeper engagement. This form of submission, tinged with irony and a sense of distance, signals an evolution in the techniques of power governance, which successfully incorporates the subject's insight into its own legitimization.

Žižek argues that the effectiveness of ideology depends not only on symbolic identification within the Symbolic order but, more crucially, on its ability to successfully organize and modulate the individual's *jouissance* (enjoyment). In traditional societies governed by prohibition, power operates through interdictions, and *jouissance* is treated as a clandestine domain to be restrained or hidden. However, in the contemporary society of "commanded enjoyment," this dynamic is inverted. The injunction issued by the social Other is no longer "Thou shalt not enjoy," but rather "You must enjoy!" Ludocapitalism aligns perfectly with this logic. Games are constructed as a positive obligation, a mode of self-realization, and a necessity for social life. Players feel pressured to pursue in-game achievements, collections, and rankings, experiencing this pursuit as an expression of personal freedom and happiness. This shift from "prohibition" to "imperative" makes resistance exceptionally

difficult, as any refusal to participate can be interpreted as an inability to enjoy, a failure to keep up with trends, or social inadequacy. Through mechanisms such as daily tasks, seasonal battle passes, and social rankings, game design transforms jouissance into quantifiable daily practices. Within this framework, individuals confirm their subjectivity and social existence by continually completing assigned tasks of pleasure.

Within this framework of commanded enjoyment, cynicism becomes a strategy for the subject to cope with the predicament. The cynical subject believes they have seen through the void and manipulation behind the imperative to enjoy, convinced that they have penetrated the illusion that games are merely combinations of code, probability, and business strategy (McGowan, 2012). However, this "seeing through" does not lead to liberation. On the contrary, cynicism provides an illusion of "knowing-it-all," allowing the subject to feel they have avoided the naivety of being fooled by game companies or social trends—the Other. By maintaining an ironic, incompletely invested cognitive stance, the subject preserves a false sense of autonomy. They think, "I play, but I don't really believe." The problem, however, lies precisely in the fact that this very stance of maintaining cognitive distance allows them to continue participating in gaming rituals with greater peace of mind. Their knowledge alleviates the moral anxiety or cognitive dissonance that might arise from participating in exploitative structures. Furthermore, as a medium, the computer game is fundamentally connected to the cynical ethos of contemporary culture (Kirkpatrick, 2017). Within the gaming framework, the cynical attitude may manifest as calculating in-game statistics, mastering the developer's tactics, or deconstructing official narratives through memes within the community. Yet, almost all of this "critique" occurs within the boundaries permitted by the game's rules, ultimately serving to prolong online time, deepen data analysis, and increase consumption frequency. The very posture of critique is commodified and co-opted, becoming part of the gaming culture's ecosystem and reinforcing the system's stability.

Therefore, the "willing" submission of gamers is a result of precise modulation at the intersection of the Symbolic and the Real. On the symbolic level, they accept the symbolic identities (ranks, titles) and community rules offered by the game. On the level of the Real, they are captured by the anxiety and excitement generated in the perpetual pursuit of the deferred objet petit a. Cynicism operates as a buffer layer within the Imaginary, allowing the subject to construct a self-image of the "savvy player," thereby rationalizing the submission and addiction evident in their actual behavior. Ultimately, the effectiveness of ideology shapes the very patterns of our desire. Players may be free to choose whether to play or not, to spend money or not, but the framework of desire within which they make these choices—the belief that pursuing these in-game goals is worthwhile and brings happiness—has already been pre-shaped by the symbolic system of ludocapitalism. True submission becomes a conversion of internal desire. "Cynical-hedonism" does not eliminate contradiction; it utilizes it. It does not demand belief; it appropriates our doubt and our jouissance, constructing a cage that is difficult to escape—a cage that is both comfortable and exhausting.

The Evolution of Governmentality: The "Modulation of Pleasure" from Disciplinary Societies to Societies of Control

The disciplinary society, as theorized by Foucault, is characterized by power acting upon individual bodies within enclosed or semi-enclosed institutions such as factories, schools, barracks, and hospitals, through hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination. Its aim is to forge "docile and useful bodies" (During, 2020). Power is visible yet unverifiable, akin to Bentham's panopticon, where individuals discipline themselves due to the perceived possibility of constant surveillance. However, as Gilles Deleuze points out, we are moving away from this "disciplinary society" dominated by environmental molds and entering a new type of "society of control." In this social formation, power becomes more fluid, decentralized, and internalized. It no longer relies primarily on physical enclosures but operates through the modulation of data flows, consumption flows, and communication flows. Control is short-term and swift, taking the form of ever-changing modulations, with a core logic of "endless training, continuous assessment, and perpetual debt," mediated by digital interfaces and algorithms (Pongratz, 2011).

This evolution in power technology aligns closely with the shift within Foucault's own thought from "discipline" to "governmentality." In his later work, Foucault's focus moved from "how power represses" to "how life is actively conducted, managed, and optimized." He termed the techniques for conducting the behavior of others and of the self "governmentality." The essence of governmentality is "the conduct of conduct"; it concerns how

various strategies, calculations, and techniques shape, influence, and adjust the field of possible actions for individuals and populations (Urošević, 2024). Unlike discipline, which aims to produce standardized individuals, governmentality acts upon the more fluid "population" and its life processes, rationalizing its interventions through forms of political-economic knowledge. For Foucault, neoliberalism represents the pinnacle of this governmentality. It extends the model of market competition to all domains of social life, shaping the individual into an "entrepreneur of the self." From skill acquisition and emotional management to social relations and leisure, all aspects of existence are required to undergo permanent self-optimization according to an economic logic of investment and return, capital and benefit. The success of governmentality lies precisely in making individuals willingly internalize this external economic rationality as their own ethos of existence and law of desire.

In this light, games, particularly large-scale multiplayer online games and mobile platform games, can be seen as paradigmatic apparatuses of the society of control. They transcend the limitations of physical milieus such as arcades or home consoles, integrating players into a persistent, always-online, data-flowing virtual field via cloud servers and smart terminals. Game designers act not merely as disciplinarians correcting players' "wrong" behaviors; they function more like calculating governors whose core task is the modulation of the players' cycles of pleasure production and consumption. Algorithms adjust matchmaking mechanisms, difficulty curves, or item drop rates based on real-time behavioral data to maintain an optimal balance of anxiety and pleasure—a state of "flow." Season passes, daily quests, and limited-time events create the very cycles of "endless training" and "continuous assessment" described by Deleuze, segmenting and reconstructing linear life-time into recurring, capitalized units of time.

Consequently, the pleasure experienced within games is a highly governed productive pleasure. Players are systematically guided to experience the pursuit of in-game goals as self-actualization and personal expression. Yet, this pursuit simultaneously generates the key elements required for capital accumulation: stable user attention-span, active social interaction data, and ultimately, cash flow realized through microtransactions. Players' "free" choices—whether to play another round or purchase a loot box—all occur within a range of possibilities meticulously modulated by algorithms. Pleasure, therefore, transforms from a spontaneous satisfaction of desire into a guided, measured, and maximized performance indicator. By seamlessly embedding the logic of governmentality into the very core of pleasure production, ludocapitalism achieves an upgrade in power technology. It appropriates players' deep-seated desires for autonomy, achievement, and social recognition, converting them into the internal energy driving the system's own reproduction. Within this paradigm, player subjectivity is reconfigured by a state of "willing" submission, with the ultimate criteria and beneficiaries defined by the capital and algorithmic logic operating behind the scenes.

THE THREE CORE TECHNOLOGIES OF "PLEASURE GOVERNANCE"

Ludocapitalism has developed a highly sophisticated and synergistic "technique of pleasure governance," whose efficacy is primarily realized through three core technologies: the Gacha System as a "Desire Programmer," the Mission and Season System as a "Time Planner," and the Social and Display System as an "Identity Performance Arena." Together, these constitute a comprehensive governance scheme targeting the player's lived experience, weaving a network in which players actively engage in self-governance while under the illusion of enjoying freedom and achievement.

Manufacturing "The Urge": The Gacha System as a Desire Programmer

The Gacha System, a core technology of ludocapitalism's "pleasure governance," functions essentially as a precisely calibrated "Desire Programmer." It is not content with selling deterministic goods. Instead, through designed random-reward mechanisms, it programs and modulates players' psychological expectations, behavioral patterns, and even the very structure of desire, ultimately manufacturing a compelling cycle of continuous engagement—what players often describe as "the urge." Our analysis of 358 valid questionnaires and interviews with 11 players of diverse profiles reveals a pervasive split between cognition and behavior. Player M2, for instance, expertly calculates probabilities yet succumbs to the obsession for a "complete collection," falling into a gambler's mentality. Player F5, fully aware of the explicit pricing, still justifies her heavy investment as "support for the creators." This split co-opts rational calculation into the narrative of desire, allowing players to consciously and persistently chase a virtual reward defined by algorithms, forever residing in the "next attempt."

From a behavioral perspective, the Gacha System constructs a powerful "action-feedback" loop, whose core lies in replacing deterministic satisfaction with unpredictable rewards. When a player clicks the draw button, they undergo a ritual meticulously packaged with audio-visual effects. While most outcomes are common items, the intermittently appearing "golden light" or rare character constitutes a strong random positive reinforcement. This unpredictable reward schedule means the act of obtaining rare items is highly reinforced, compelling players to constantly repeat the cycle of "investment – anticipation – feedback." Player behavior gradually shifts from being goal-oriented towards acquiring a specific item to becoming engrossed in the process of tension and release inherent in chasing the reward itself. Our survey data shows that while 42.46% of players claim their spending is "very rational and restrained," 27.37% admit to occasional overspending during specific events or for strong preferences, and 6.42% report it happens "frequently, hard to control." This confirms that random reinforcement mechanisms can breach the rational defenses of a significant portion of users, channeling their behavior into the system's predetermined pathways.

The system is adept at transforming players' own emotional investment and rational calculations into the basis for continued engagement, particularly by leveraging "sunk costs" and "anticipated anxiety." Having already invested numerous draws to obtain a desired character, the irrecoverable cost creates a powerful psychological pressure, fostering the belief that "giving up now means a total loss," leading to irrational additional investment. After more than 70 unsuccessful draws, Player F1 felt that "all her anticipation and preparation were in vain, and she had lost several hundred yuan." This frustration and reluctance directly drove her subsequent top-up behavior. Simultaneously, by making characters available only in specific "banners" during limited "event periods," the system manufactures a sense of scarcity and urgency, breeding intense "fear of missing out." Player F3 worried that missing the current event card would mean being "excluded from the complete story with him." This fear of being left out of the community narrative overrode her originally strict budget plan. Frequent statements in interviews, such as "the next rerun will take months" and "not drawing now means missing the immediate experience," reveal how the system manipulates temporality to generate anxiety and drive immediate consumption.

This mechanism creates a significant stratification of investment among the player base, forming a pyramid-like revenue structure. Our survey data indicates that while the proportion of players spending over 500 RMB per month totals only 6.15%, the investment depth of these "high spenders" forms the financial cornerstone of this business model. The proportion of players who spend almost nothing is as high as 41.34%, while those spending below 100 RMB monthly account for 35.47%. This reveals that the economic sustainability of the Gacha System relies heavily on the deep excavation and continuous extraction of desire from a minority of players. The case of Player M4, who spent multiple "648 RMB" packs to obtain an "Honor of Kings" Legendary skin to gain "face" and "satisfaction" in peer competition, exemplifies this. Despite regretting the bill afterward, the impulse of "must have it now" completely dominated his actions at the time. Consumption driven by peer pressure and social comparison highlights the attribute of Gacha items as "social currency," embedding their value within players' real-life identity construction and relational networks.

Therefore, as a "Desire Programmer," the Gacha System manufactures neurological stimuli by manipulating randomness, sets behavioral traps by exploiting cognitive biases, and reinforces engagement motives by grafting social anxieties. While chasing the perpetually sliding objet petit a, players' pleasure, anxiety, anticipation, and regret are all modulated and utilized by the system. The system merely needs to set the rules, probabilities, and time windows; players' own desires, rationality, and emotions will then operate automatically, driving them to continuously channel their life-time and economic resources into this cycle.

Weaving the "Daily Grind": The Mission and Season System as a Time Planner

If the Gacha System manufactures immediate, explosive experiences of "the urge" by manipulating randomness, then the Mission and Season System functions as a covert "Time Planner," controlling the rhythm of players' daily lives and transforming free time into structured, predictable, and perpetually value-generating productive time. Through cyclical goals and rules, this mechanism guides, and even manufactures, players' daily behavioral habits, ultimately shaping game participation into an almost instinctive life routine.

From a design logic perspective, daily tasks, weekly challenges, and season passes constitute a precise time-management scheme. Daily tasks require players to complete actions such as logging in, engaging in battles, or

performing specific activities within a 24-hour cycle. The rewards, though minor, are positioned as essential, aiming to establish a minimum daily touchpoint to prevent players from churning due to short-term absence. Weekly challenges extend the cycle, offering more valuable rewards to incentivize players to allocate longer playtime within a week. The season system, typically lasting several weeks to months, serves as a macro content framework and ultimate goal (Tamer, 2023). By introducing new themes, storylines, unlockable cosmetics or characters, and a "season level" that requires progressive advancement, it segments a lengthy period into countless small, daily-play-driven objectives. Our survey data shows that while 42.74% of players report "selectively participating" in the task system, 20.95% feel it provides them with "stable motivation and goals to log in," and a further 16.48% directly experience it as a form of "bondage, like a second job." In interviews, Player F2 described clearing the "Honor of Kings" Battle Pass tasks and Shining Nikki dailies as "basic maintenance." Even when exhausted after work, the thought of "dailies not done, Battle Pass XP not gained" would generate anxiety, leading to a mechanical "clicking" just to attain the relief of "finally finished." This spectrum of experience, sliding from "motivation" to "burden," precisely illustrates how system design provides goals and order while simultaneously creating obligation and pressure.

This tendency to gamify labor reaches an extreme in the case of Player F4. She project-managed her Animal Crossing: New Horizons island development, creating planning diagrams and collection trackers in Notion, breaking down the gameplay experience into five specific daily KPIs. She self-deprecatingly called this "working a second shift within the game," with a focus level "more intense than reviewing company financial reports." Player F4's case reveals how the mission system, by decomposing grand but vague "fun" into clear, quantifiable, and executable micro-task lists, transforms the perception of "play" into that of "labor." The pleasure players derive increasingly stems from the "transactional sense of completion" achieved by finishing lists, progressing bars, and clearing notification markers. In game design theory, the "flow" state is considered an ideal experience, one precondition being a balance between challenge and skill. However, daily task systems often maintain a low-level, routine engagement by providing repetitive challenges, such as "complete three matches," that fall well below the player's skill level, thereby ensuring stable user activity metrics (McDaniel et al., 2024)

Building upon this, the season system introduces more potent mechanisms of temporal scarcity and social comparison. Each season is a "limited-time event" with a defined start and end date. This artificially created deadline fosters a powerful "fear of missing out." Limited-edition skins, exclusive items, or titles become permanently unavailable or exceedingly difficult to obtain after the season ends, compelling players to maintain sufficient engagement intensity during the season to avoid falling behind in the virtual social world. Player M1 describes this as a "never-ending treadmill," where stopping means relative regression. From a social perspective, Player F2 shared that after being too busy with work to log in for a few days, she not only missed rewards but also found herself unable to "join the conversation" in friends' gaming discussions, experiencing a tangible sense of "social alienation." This genuine social anxiety stemming from lagging game progress is one of the most powerful adhesives of the mission and season system. It skillfully bundles players' time investment with social capital, making quitting the game not merely an interruption of personal entertainment but potentially leading to marginalization within a social circle.

This combined mechanism firmly locks players in through the "habit loop." Habit formation typically involves three components: a cue, a routine, and a reward (Neil, 2012). In the gaming context, a phone push notification or a fixed leisure time becomes the "cue"; logging into the game and clearing dailies becomes the "routine"; and collecting rewards and watching progress bars increase provides the immediate "reward." Through long-term repetition of this loop, game participation recedes from a conscious decision into an unconscious habit. Our survey data indicates that for 31.28% of players attempting to reduce playtime, the biggest obstacle is "the habit I've formed and the feeling of unfinished business." This is precisely the result of the combined force of habit and perpetually suspended goals. The task system is always in an "unfinished" state: today's list is cleared, only for a new one to appear tomorrow; one season ends, and the next immediately begins. It creates a perpetual cycle of objectives, subtly transferring the agency over time planning from the individual to the rhythm preset by the system designers.

Constructing the "Social Sphere": The Social and Display System as an Identity Performance Arena

If the Gacha and Mission systems implement governance through immediate desire and daily rhythm respectively, then the game's Social and Display System constructs a broader "social sphere"—a theater where

players' virtual identities are performed, compared, and continuously evaluated. This system transforms players' consumption behaviors, in-game achievements, and esthetic preferences into social symbols that can be observed, measured, and competed over. Our survey data indicates that social interaction is a key driver for sustained engagement: 26.54% of players consider social gameplay the core design element that attracts their continued participation, and 27.10% state that gaming constitutes an important part of their real-world social life. Games are gradually becoming tightly interwoven social networks and fields of identity.

Within this social sphere, the primary function of virtual items shifts from "use-value" to predominantly "symbolic value" and "social currency." A rare skin, a limited-edition outfit, or a top-tier weapon derives its potency not merely from stat bonuses but from the social signals it conveys—wealth, investment, skill, or luck. For Player M4, the core motivation for purchasing a "Legendary" skin was to "command respect in matches." Merely displaying the skin icon elicited admiring reactions from teammates and focused attention from opponents, making him feel "more confident speaking up." What drove his consumption was not the item's feel but its symbolic value as "prestige" and a "status symbol." In games like *Shining Nikki*, Player F2 points out that the social display attribute is even more direct; rare outfits serve as players' "résumés" in the virtual world, directly determining their "standing within the community." This symbolic economy forces players into an endless status competition based on visible objects. Our survey found that 11.45% of players prioritize an item's "rarity and recognition within the community" when spending, while 8.66% cite the motivation as "keeping up with friends or the community mainstream to avoid falling behind." Consumption is, to a significant extent, a response to social comparison pressure, a strategy to maintain or elevate one's position in the virtual social hierarchy.

To maximize the tension of this social comparison, game design institutionalizes a series of "display stages" and "viewing mechanisms." The skin showcase frame on loading screens, exclusive in-game spawn animations or recall effects, dedicated character information pages within communities, and even built-in "profile" or "showcase" systems collectively constitute a panoptic theater of display. Each player is simultaneously an actor and an audience member; displaying their own symbolic capital while also gazing upon and evaluating others'. This continuous, mutual viewing generates profound identity anxiety and desire. When Player F2 saw a friend showcasing a new outfit and found herself unable to participate in the discussion, she experienced a sense of "alienation within social relations." When Player M4 was overwhelmingly defeated and taunted by an opponent with a rarer skin, he felt "loss of face" and "frustration." This anxiety swiftly transforms into a consumption impulse to acquire equivalent or superior symbolic capital, aiming for a reversal like "next time, I'll crush you with this." Social media platforms and dedicated game communities further expand this theater. Players share screenshots of achievements, where the received likes and comments serve as direct affirmation of their virtual identities, reinforcing the logic of identification that "the more complete your collection, the more confidence you have in speaking" (Gabarnet et al., 2025).

This social sphere permits and encourages players to project and construct an "ideal self." Through customized character appearances, carefully coordinated outfits, and hard-earned titles, players craft a self-image that may not be fully expressible in the real world—one that is more powerful, beautiful, unique, or aligned with subcultural esthetics (Wilde, 2023). Player F1 found "companionship and solace" by spending late nights roaming the virtual landscape with a character she had invested emotions in, watching the sunset. Player F3 viewed the in-game "him" as a perfect partner, gaining a sense of "being unconditionally noticed and cherished." The virtual identity gradually becomes a significant vessel for emotion and ideals. However, capital exploits this psychological need to construct an ideal self and puts a clear price tag on it. Acquiring those iconic symbols that best signify the ideal identity—whether a signature "wedding" card illustration, a "Supreme" frame representing top-tier prowess, or a collaboration skin that will never return—often requires the most substantial investment of money or time. Consequently, the pursuit of an ideal identity is seamlessly linked to consumption directives for specific commodities. Players pay to "become their imagined self," while the system, by monopolizing the production and distribution of these core symbols, achieves governance over players' very sense of identity.

Ultimately, the social sphere constructed by the Social and Display System enables efficient "stratification" management and a closed value loop. Different spending levels, degrees of investment, and esthetic tastes naturally segregate players into distinct community circles. High-spending players garner respect in top guilds with limited-edition mounts; collectors are celebrated in fashion communities for their unique taste; skilled players flaunt their status on leaderboards with exclusive badges. These strata provide players with a sense of

belonging while also establishing a clear social ladder. By designing activities and distributing rewards exclusive to specific strata, the game system continuously reinforces these boundaries, incentivizing players in lower strata to climb upward. In the survey, 24.86% of players admitted to occasionally investing more due to fear of falling behind their friends. The entire social sphere thus becomes a self-reinforcing dynamic system: display triggers comparison, comparison manufactures anxiety and desire, desire drives consumption and investment, and new consumption outcomes re-enter the display cycle, simultaneously consolidating or elevating the player's stratified position.

CONCLUSION

To break free from the cycle of game capitalism's "governance of pleasure," the awakening of individual will or moral appeals alone are far from sufficient. In our survey data, although 43.02% of players reported being "fairly aware" that game designs are intended to maximise their engagement and sometimes felt influenced by this, 33.80% still described their overall feeling toward games as a "love-hate relationship." This fissure between cognition and emotion is precisely a typical symptom of "cynical immersion." Resistance on the part of players must begin with dissecting the operational mechanisms of this governance apparatus, and on this basis, explore multiple pathways—regulatory, communal, and subjectively reconstructive—ultimately pointing towards a "political economy of game pleasure" framework capable of distinguishing the sources of pleasure and restoring authentic gaming enjoyment.

Therefore, the primary pathway out of governance lies in external, institutional ethical regulation. This requires that regulatory and legislative actions directly intervene in the core commercial logic of game design. First, transparency and mandatory constraints must be imposed on probabilistic consumption mechanisms. This includes mandating the real-time disclosure of comprehensive, actual drop rates rather than vague probability intervals; establishing hard caps on daily and monthly individual spending with built-in cooling-off periods; and setting clear, reasonable guaranteed paths for obtaining all rare virtual items. Simultaneously, interventions should target addictive design elements such as "daily quests"—for example, prohibiting major rewards conditioned solely on consecutive logins, thereby weakening the compulsive binding of games to players' daily routines. These measures are not intended to stifle the industry, but rather, as 27.10% of our respondents called for, to encourage developers to "reduce forced grinding and pay-to-win mechanics," striking a basic balance between commercial interests and player well-being. Such regulations aim to erect external barriers to support players' already fragile rational decision-making, counteracting the exploitative design built into systems that infinitely amplify human vulnerabilities.

Even within the powerful social body of capitalism, there exist resistant factors that challenge prevailing subjectivation and capital-generating trends. Player F5, as a "character fan" (chuli player), recognises that the way to combat the sorrow of "love being price-tagged" is to "create, to analyse, and to engage in sincere exchanges with fellow fans." This means shifting the focus of investment from singular, system-priced consumption behaviours toward creative fan creations, deep narrative interpretation, and genuine community connections. Such practices generate meanings, emotions, and social relationships that algorithms cannot fully appropriate, thereby transcending the logic of pleasure-consumption. Likewise, within gaming communities, social modes that go beyond "rarity" comparisons should be encouraged—favouring instead cultures centred on creativity, skill, mutual aid, or pure friendship. As Player F3 experienced in sharing the joy of gacha pulls with her fellow enthusiasts, such communal recognition can partially alleviate the social pressures of symbolic consumption. The essence of these practices is to carve out a relatively autonomous "enclave of affect and meaning" within the game system itself.

At the same time, attention must be paid to cultivating individual "game-pleasure literacy" and reconstructing subjectivity. This requires fostering a capacity to trace and reflect upon one's own pleasurable experiences. When Player M5 feels a "vast emptiness and absurdity" after turning off the device late at night, and when Player F1 begins calculating "cost-effectiveness" after a spending spree and experiences a "sense of guilt," we need to ask: Is the happiness I pursue derived from spontaneous curiosity, exploration, and creation, or is it a conditioned response to system-designed "progress bar advancement" and "achievement notification sounds"? Is my desire for consumption an endogenous emotional need, or is it manufactured through social comparison, fear of missing out, and community pressure? Such reflection aims to break the spell of "commanded enjoyment" and to remain

vigilant against uncritically accepting rhetoric that gamifies everything, for that risks eroding the creative power inherent in free and joyful play itself. Rebuilding subjectivity also means actively seeking out gaming experiences with weaker governance intensity—such as story-driven single-player or indie games—or, in non-digital realms, rediscovering "play" in its simplest form: rule-based, process-oriented, and intrinsically fulfilling.

The critique of game capitalism ultimately leads towards an overarching framework of a "political economy of game pleasure." Under this framework, pleasure is redefined as a core political-economic good that is monopolistically produced in the age of digital capitalism. Its production is meticulously manipulated by capital through algorithms and design; its distribution follows strict paywalls and probability gradients; and its consumption process simultaneously completes the extraction of "surplus value" from players' attention, emotional energy, behavioural data, and money, while continuously reproducing docile subjects oriented towards "performance supremacy," "emotional investment," and "symbolic competition." The critique advanced here is not a denial of games' artistic potential or their capacity for social connection, but rather a targeted exposure of the dominant exploitative logic that has emerged through their hyper-capitalisation and instrumentalisation.

The path beyond cynical immersion is a composite one that combines institutional regulation, community co-construction, and individual enlightenment. Its ultimate goal is to cultivate a new kind of subjectivity capable of identifying the "governance of pleasure" and daring to imagine and practice alternative possibilities for gaming. This requires shifting the fundamental question from "Is this game enjoyable?" to "By whom is the freedom and happiness I am immersed in designed, and to what end does it ultimately serve?" In the enchanting labyrinth of pleasure woven by game capitalism, maintaining and practising this speculative vigilance is an endless exercise in thought and living that our era demands to defend human autonomy and authentic pleasure.

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