

Career Delusions and Ludopolitics in the Gaming Industry

A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry, by Ergin Bulut
(ILR Press, 2020)

Reviewed by Aidan Schmidt

To many young video game enthusiasts, the possibility of earning a living through gaming is an enticing prospect. *Ergin Bulut's A Precarious Game* takes a deep dive into the murky waters of the video game industry and looks into the numerous barriers to entry that exist within the field. The main thesis Bulut pushes in this book is that the video game industry as a whole can be fun for veterans, and precarious for those on the bottom. Bulut is a Turkish media studies professor at Koc University. His findings could be biased on the account that he only looked at the practices of one company located in the Midwest of the United States. Studio Desire, the company that Bulut looked at, is representative of many other video game development companies, employing predominantly white, heterosexual males. His book's intended audience is mainly men and women coming out of college who want to enter the video game industry, yet his work is also relevant to a younger demographic. His findings answer the question that many aspiring video game developers wish to know for themselves.

The first chapter discusses the implications of ludopolitics and how the illusion of playing games for work leads to more egregious inequality than normal. The second chapter highlights the decrease in worker autonomy and the notion of technomascularity which is exacerbated because of the decline of garage culture. The third chapter looks at how successful games change the dynamics of a city, tying in ludopolitics to city demographics. The fourth chapter reveals the chaotic communication process that occurs between publishing companies and developers, with an emphasis on conflict between stress and creative emotion. Chapter 5 provides insight into woman's perspectives regarding the notion of technomascularity and the perceived unfairness of being able to have fun at work and make more money than women. Chapter 6 deals with the abysmally low wages that those at the bottom of the ladder receive for their work, which cuts off the line of work as a viable option for those who need a living wage and experience. Chapter 7 discusses the culture of layoffs that plagues both the middle and upper section of the development ladder which hemorrhages job stability, and for those who remain, puts a huge amount of work on to a gradually smaller and smaller number of people, creating a toxic work environment.

Bulut's work digs deep into many of the relatively unknown aspects of the video game industry that are hidden from the general public. In his book, he discusses potential factors that he attributes to the trap that is the video game industry. He starts off by introducing the idea of ludopolitics, the notion that, the illusion of having fun while working, something unique to the video game industry, produces higher levels of inequality within a workplace when compared to other industries. Bulut cites the egregious difference in standards between video game testers, those lower on the ladder, and developers, those higher on the ladder, as the key example of this.

Bulut also discusses the idea of technomascularity, the idea that the technology and jobs surrounding technology should be dominated by men, when he talks about the decrease of garage culture and the homestead's perspective on men working for fun. Bulut's main points about the presence of ludopolitics and technomascularity, while obviously unable to explain all of the factors that have led to a stagnant video game industry, touches on the major barriers of entry that exist within the field.

His evidence for both points are sound, as he frequently references data that he collected from his time at Desire; The fact that Bulot had not previously done research in this field and that he focuses on a single firm suggest that his findings must be viewed with caution, though his methods appear sound for this type of investigation. Bulut takes a traditional anthropologic approach to his research instead of raw data analysis which creates a more personal feel to the book compared with other investigations. The lack of hard statistical analysis could be off-putting for those looking for a more technical analysis, but the grassroots nature of the Desire research can justify such an approach.

The one issue I have with his approach lies within some of the terminology that the author uses in the article, namely his main talking points, ludopolitics and technomascularity, and how the terms seem contrived to further his argument. His use of the word "technomascularity" comes from a previous study conducted by Robin Johnson, who also did research in the video game industry, and his definition of such, "Technomascularity becomes visible through good command of computer knowledge, machinic manipulation, passion for games, antiauthoritarian work attitude, or ordinary use of language that bears the imprints of gendered imaginations and assumptions" comes from an earlier study conducted by Jon Dovey and Hellen Kennedy who researched computer games as media.ⁱ The lack of an unrefined definition on the part of Bulut, while informative, is confusing for those not familiar with his terminology.

In regard to his use of "ludopolitics," his first use of the word, found in the introduction to the book, does not define the term; it appears later in the first chapter, with Bulut defining it as "the complex assemblage of multidimensional, uneven power relations at the local and global level, ultimately setting the political terms of who can play and enjoy work as opposed to those who have to work."ⁱⁱ Again, Bulut has done a similar job with this term as he did the first: His definition is wordy and does not provide a clear enough explanation in layman's terms.

His third major point about the instability of the industry functions more as an expository section, as Bulut gets into the details of why and how the video game industry works against new talent and simultaneously cuts out established talent. His section here leans heavily on the aforementioned ethnographic anthropological approach, but I believe that it works well for his argument; the sheer amount of evidence that he gathered in his tenure at Desire, both anecdotal from workers, and from sitting in at interviews, plainly paints the situation in no uncertain terms. The harsh turnover rates that lower skilled workers experience severely hinders the chance for upward mobility within a company, while the corporate mindset of lowering workers to preserve costs runs rampant throughout the higher levels of companies, which in turn, places more stress upon those who remain in those positions; this fate is all too real for readers who work in the corporate setting.

His claimed political and economic stance is that of "critical political economy, feminist theory, and autonomist Marxism"ⁱⁱⁱ which plants him firmly on the left on the ideological spectrum, and his conclusions about the video game industry as a whole. Autonomous Marxists believe that the working class is broader than the traditional Marxian view,

encompassing both blue- and white-collar workers, and capitalism is a rational system where workers can achieve revolutionary leverage through their labor. Knowing this, one can understand why his issues with the video game industry encompass both the testers at the bottom and the developers at the top.

All in all, Bulut's work sheds some much-needed light into the sad state of many employees in the video game industry and provides a crucial warning to those looking to enter the industry for themselves. While his findings may at times be confusing to the general public, Bulut still manages to report his time at *Desire* in a digestible manner and touches on the pressing issues that face the video game industry. I would recommend this book as a requirement to prospective computer science majors in both high school and college, because I believe that it goes into unusual detail regarding the actual struggles of those working within the industry, thanks to the ethnographic approach that Bulut took with his research. Additionally, I think that computer science majors, whether or not they go into the video game industry, could benefit from Bulut's insights in any tech field with a similar dynamic as that at *Desire*. By using video games as an example, the information can be more easily consumed by that demographic.

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ⁱ Ergin Bulut *A Precarious Game*, 63

ⁱⁱ Ergin Bulut *A Precarious Game*, 36

ⁱⁱⁱ Ergin Bulut *A Precarious Game*, 11