

Book Review:

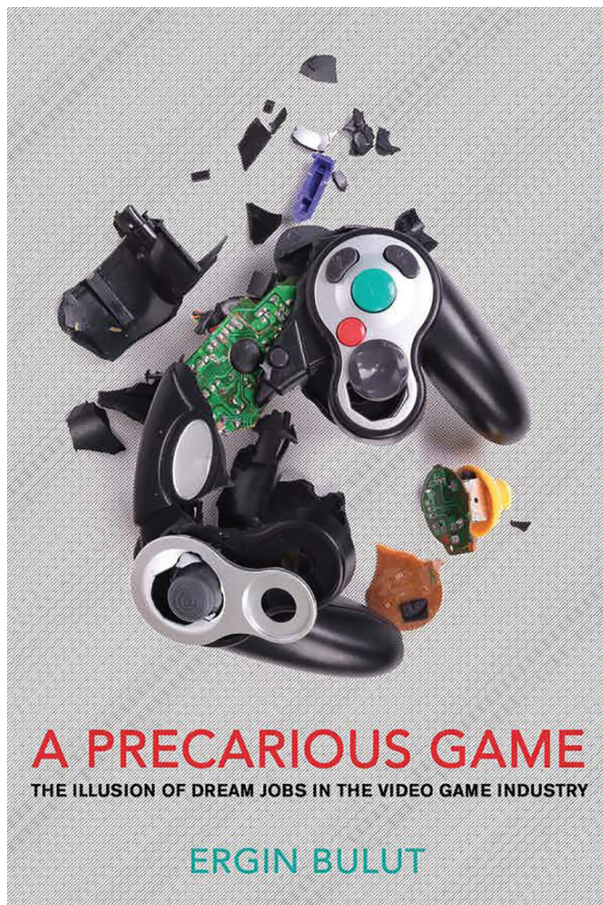
A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry

Bulut, Ergin

ITHACA: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2020.

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As one of the world's leading entertainment industries, video game production has attained the status as a cutting-edge, technology-driven, "cool" profession that thousands of people dream about joining. The hip and glamorous life of designing, writing, or producing video games embraces the neoliberal rhetoric of "doing what you love" and promulgates the perspective that love and labor can work hand in hand. Ergin Bulut takes aim at these potentially dangerous and complicated attitudes and behaviors that are deeply rooted in one of the most precarious media industries of our time.

A Precarious Game lays out a three-year ethnographic study of a struggling yet successful video game development company as it navigates being purchased by a large game publisher, the resulting ramifications of the purchase, questionable financial decisions by the parent company, and the resulting bankruptcy and second purchase of the developer. Bulut explores how failure, meritocratic ideals, and inequalities between members of

the gaming workforce contribute to the precariousness of the video game industry through perspectives such as finances, labor rationalization, and the use of space. Using the overarching theme of labor as an act of love, Bulut examines the “ludopolitical regime” that structures the hierarchies and much of the decision-making within video game development companies. Using a combination of feminist theory, Marxist theory, and critical political theory, Bulut’s analysis of the different factors that impact the video game industry’s cultural infrastructure illuminates how inequality and neoliberal understandings of labor are endemic to the process of video game creation.

Ergin Bulut’s ethnographic methodology and interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks provide a unique insider perspective on how the video game industry functions and maintains itself through the ludopolitical regime that Bulut identifies. This regime is structured via uneven power relationships at multiple levels of the industry. Ludopolitics sets “the political terms of who can play and enjoy work as opposed to those who have to work”² and maintains the inequalities of meritocracy that many other cultural game theorists such as Adrienne Shaw, Kishonna L. Gray, Shira Chess, and Christopher Paul have noted as endemic to gamers and gaming culture. Bulut furthers this conversation by extending it into the actual creation of the games and the video game industry.

Bulut lays out a foundation—the structures, cultural practices, and history of the video game industry—in the book’s introduction and first chapter. These sections explain the ethnographic methodology used throughout the book; provide a brief history of Desire (a pseudonym), the video game development company; and define the ludopolitical regime and how it functions as a controlling structure for the video game industry on both a local and global scale.

In chapter 2, Bulut begins to describe Desire’s specific circumstances that illustrate how the ludopolitical regime operates within an American game development company. Desire’s acquisition by a large publishing company changed the structure and flow of labor done by the company’s workers, ultimately influencing the company’s culture, space, and morale. This chapter follows the workers as they adapt to these changes and explores what their labor means to them at this transformative and crucial moment in their careers.

Expanding on these changes in more detail, chapter 3 looks at the geographical impact of Desire’s acquisition and subsequent move into a larger space in its Midwestern city location. Workplace spatial dimensions are an often-overlooked aspect of labor culture within video game industry studies. Bulut explores how the new parent company began to change Desire’s workflow by hiring more creatives and upper management to control and rationalize the labor being performed. These additional bodies necessitated that the company move from its small, intimate workspace into a larger, more corporate public-facing building. The local community welcomed this change, as it kicked off a revitalization of the city’s crumbling downtown. Meanwhile, inside Desire’s office walls, Bulut explores how the new workspace precipitated changes in company culture that some people welcomed and some did not.

Chapter 4 takes a Marxist turn, exploring how Desire’s labor changed as more core creatives joined its workforce. Bulut also describes the growing presence (and number) of project managers responsible for guiding and to managing the workers’ productivity. This chapter

emphasizes the friction Desire's creative workers experienced under this new form of management, which evaluated their productivity instead of their product. Desire's parent company proclaimed a fun and flexible work environment, but contradicted its own narrative by expanding the hierarchy of managers, producers, and executives.

Chapter 5 considers the gendered and domestic influences of familial relationships at Desire. Raising the question of domestic partners and their invisible labor is an unexpected but not unwelcome addition to Bulut's ethnographic analysis. Bulut analyzes the seldom-discussed labor done by Desire workers' domestic partners through themes such as childcare, leisure time, and housework. Centering this analysis through the concept of technomasculture, Bulut argues for recognizing the cost of the labor demands on Desire's workers through their relationships with family, friends, and partners. Many of the partners interviewed discuss how crunch time in the video game industry is like being single again and forces them to shoulder all domestic work solo. Bulut criticizes the company's acceptance and promotion of this libertarian work ethic as being harmful: it causes domestic labor inequity, adds stress to workers' personal relationships, and devalues domestic partners' contributions.

Chapter 6 addresses the topic of game testers, focusing on the extreme labor precarity associated with what workers call "second-class citizenship"³ within Desire's worker hierarchy. Using the phrase "degradation of fun,"⁴ Bulut argues that game testers embody the joy of working in a cool industry despite their often temporary and underappreciated labor that guarantees a working and successful product. Using a Marxist approach again, Bulut critiques game testers' employment circumstances in general and more specifically at Desire at the moment when the parent company's poor financial decisions begin to negatively impact Desire's workplace stability.

Bulut chronicles Desire's parent company's sudden downturn in chapter 7. A chain of poor financial decisions made by the parent company causes layoffs to happen right before a large game launch and ultimately results in the sale of Desire to another company—despite the new game's success. Bulut focuses on worker morale, the decisions of individual creative workers to stay or leave the company, and the anxiety surrounding the second purchase of the company in less than five years amid a worldwide economic downturn and industry-wide tumult. The discussion of unionization and resistance to such actions among Desire's creative laborers shows how these workers navigate the precarious situation in which they find themselves, despite achieving success within the industry. Ultimately, Bulut contends, it is the ingrained rhetoric of "loving the work" that impedes any progress toward alleviating precarity in the video game industry.

In the book's conclusion, Bulut argues that workers must shed the "loving the work" mentality if they are to move the industry away from its precarious employment practices and labor structures. Overall, *A Precarious Game* illustrates important issues and opportunities for understanding the immaterial labor, rhetoric, and capitalistic structures that have become commonplace within the video game industry. Ergin Bulut deftly takes an insider's ethnographic view of the video game industry's struggles and works them into a coherent, succinct, and alarming analysis of how the neoliberal, meritocratic "doing what you love" rhetoric has been embodied by game development workers and exploited by game companies. If the

book has one weakness, it is the lack of analysis on race, gender, and the global impact of industry rhetoric. In addition, when describing technomascularity and the invisible labor of domestic partners, Bulut only discusses heterosexual relationships, leaving room for future exploration of these topics as both the industry and game culture have begun to address these issues more seriously in recent years. *A Precarious Game* is a valuable and informative look into the precarious labor, relationships, and attitudes of game development workers at a time when there are more hopefuls than ever seeking jobs in the video game industry.

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² Ergin Bulut, *A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 36.

³ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.