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Selling Elysium: the political economy of radical game distribution

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores *Disco Elysium*'s first major expansion, "Working Class Update" as emblematic of the potential fracture between the game's themes and its politics of production and distribution. Our central claim is that in this update, the studio has reacted to the audience's appreciation for the game's labor themes within broader dissatisfaction with the industry's otherwise exploitative practices, yet was constrained by the contemporary dynamics of said industry. First, we examine *Disco Elysium*'s radical political orientation and the platformized political economy of digital game distribution through ZA/UM's origins within the Estonia-specific ICT scene. Second, we describe the current state of videogames distribution, in critical dialog with Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter's concept of a "game of multitude." We show the limits and contradictions of *Disco Elysium* to enact radical political stance in a growingly consolidated and platform-dependent video games market. Finally, through a qualitative empirical analysis of the community's responses to the Worker's Class Update on Reddit and Steam, we examine the game's fit into the above-mentioned framework through key themes of dissonant development, tactical games and software commons.

As one walks the isometric streets of Martinaise, the fictional district in which the video game *Disco Elysium* (DE) takes place, the question of labour is ever present. Part parallel universe, part alternative history, this *counterfactual* (Pargman *et al*. 2017; Apperley 2018) game brings to the forefront the great schisms of early modernity: political revolutions, class struggle and urban strife. As a counterfactual, the game 'remixes everyday popular history which creates scope for an expression of identity that challenges the hegemony of official history' (Apperley 2018: 6). Released by the Estonian studio ZA/UM in 2019, the game draws from classic isometric Computer Role Playing Games (CRPGs) such as *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999) or the *Baldur's Gate* (Bioware 1998-) franchise. In it, the player takes the role of an initially nameless amnesiac police detective, thrust into the dense microcosm of Martinaise and its weary inhabitants. A modern nuance to traditional gameplay is the contextual skill development where, rather than upgrading "classic" traits such as Strength or Dexterity, our protagonist unlocks various aspects of his psyche that act as a twisted Greek chorus: each with its own personality and voice, offering (unwanted) advice in dealing with various situations. Another innovation is the

"Thought Cabinet": a visual representation of beliefs, heuristics and other mental schema held by the player/character, providing positive and negative traits. The game thus relies on dialogue (external as well as internal), rather than combat, to flesh out the world and its hero.

And what a world it is. Inspired by the French revolution and the birth of modernity, it features an industrial aesthetic, a union strike, as well as competing revanchist, liberal and Marxist political stances as its backbone. These are dominant in its themes, story and even mechanics. The notion of labour appears through the interaction with the working-class populace of the neighbourhood, in questioning the player character's moral position as employed by the occupational government of the region; in exploring the class tensions between organized labour and the owners of the means of production. It thus comes as little surprise that the first major update of the game, "The Working Class Update" (WCU) released in May 2020, borrows heavily from this language. Optimizing the software and thus lowering the games' hardware requirements, it purported to

> [run] on as many hardworking machines as possible. No matter how old or low-tech they may be!
>
> If you found that your computer struggled to run Disco Elysium before then this update will hopefully remedy that. Many more people can play for the first time, or have a much better and smoother experience than before. This one's for all our bratan keeping it real by booting up games on their ancient potato machines.
>
> With this latest update, Disco Elysium's minimum specs have been dropped down to Mariana Trench levels. (Disco Elysium Steam page 2020)

Despite some complaints on the forums, the update does indeed work (at least on one of the author's 4-year-old Mac-Book Airs). The update also included the announcement of multiple translated versions, several with professional localization companies, others as open-source volunteer projects with the community voting on which languages to include. With its playful language, and a nod toward their Eastern-European fanbase ("bratan" is a Slavic "bro/ dude" variant, "potato" is similarly evocative) the developers invoke their own post-Soviet origins and provide a rare – in marketing language – hint at the political economy of global creation, distribution and consumption of digital games outside of the centres of game production, located such as they are in the United States, the UK, and Japan (Kerr 2017).

Recognizing the imbrication between content, values and the material conditions of production, we frame DE's complicated existence as a cultural commodity within an uneven global political economy of digital game production, distribution, and consumption. We ask whether a game with clear working class and even revolutionary themes at the level of narrative can stay true to such themes at the level of the game's production and distribution. Our central claim is that in this update, the studio has reacted to the audience's appreciation for the game's labour themes within broader dissatisfaction with the industry's otherwise exploitative practices. The same player base can also be critical when becoming suspicious of ZA/UM's lack of commitment to the values they espouse in-game. This puts the studio in a bind, as to successfully compete in the global video games marketplace, they must subscribe to production methods that will be perceived by their fans as hypocritical. To demonstrate this, our argument progresses through three main steps. **First**, we examine *Disco Elysium*'s radical political orientation and the platformised political economy of digital game distribution (Hammar *et al*. 2020). Contextualizing this is ZA/UM's origins within the Estonia-specific ICT scene,

where the small nation's troubled exit from state socialism to capitalism set the stage for the game's development in the periphery of the European Union. To us, the subsequent move of the development team to the UK clearly illustrates the centralizing tendency of 'platform imperialism' and 'digital spatial fixes' for capital (Jin 2015; Greene, Joseph 2015). **Second**, we describe the current state of video game distribution, drawing from recent scholarship in the political economy of games and platforms. Specifically, we explore through critical dialog with (Dyer-Witheford, de Peuter 2009; 2020) the concept of a 'game of multitude,' the limits and contradictions of the game to enact a radical political stance in a growingly consolidated, platform-dependent and extractive video game market. **Finally**, through a qualitative empirical analysis of the community's responses to the Working Class Update on Reddit and Steam, we consider the discourse of a "working class" PC, and the material implications of extending access to DE to more players worldwide.

LOCAL BEGINNING, GLOBAL AMBITION

In an interview with *Edge* magazine, Aleksander Rostov, one of the ZA/UM's cofounders and the art director of DE states that "Our generation is very much formed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, of the '90s Tallinn and Estonia, which was a gruesome time" (Wiltshire 2020). In reflecting on how this upbringing influenced the game's themes, gameplay and aesthetic, a central topic that returns throughout the interview is the material limitation placed on Estonia's under-developed gaming talent. "The idea that you can make a video game in Tallinn is completely ridiculous" comments Rostov in the same interview, while the game's writer and another co-founder Robert Kurvitz points out that, at the time, the Estonian capital had only one other (mobile) game studio. And while the game developers managed to stay in Tallinn for four years - growing their development team locally and through remote contractors - eventually the majority emigrated to

London, citing access to programmers and voice-over talent as chief concerns (*ibid*.).

In one sense, this reflects the inherent inequalities of cultural production that the internet and information technology are unable to overcome. In fact, it's increasingly clear that as it stands, they have played a key role in increasing these inequalities. The free movement of information and ideas, and the growing ease of access to once-expensive creative tools certainly has created opportunities for new voices to be heard in the digital games industry (Nicoll, Keogh 2019). But the movement of labour and capital globally is not equally distributed, and in fact concentrates to a greater and greater extent in very few select locales. These are the "global cities" of digital game production which have benefited from direct government intervention, usually in the form of tax breaks on labour costs (Joseph 2012; Parker, Jenson 2017). Government intervention like this is necessary to make these cities and states more competitive, highlighting a real challenge to smaller, poorer nations to gain any meaningful toehold in the global cultural marketplace.

This reflects Kerr's (2017: 28) argument that not all major digital game corporations are "globalized to the same degree." Instead, these companies set up in established geographies where existing labour and educational resources are available. This in turn leads to other "agglomerative" industrial effects. It comes as no surprise that countries with established cultural and tech industries, extending back to the days of Cold War military spending (with the United States at the top of this list), have remained at the top of this post-industrial value chain. The exceptions to this rule are a handful of Asian states – South Korea, Singapore, and most notably, China – which have had success by carefully guarding their tech industries and propping up local champions of platform and social media companies, which have recently diversified into app and game development through strategic partnerships with western developers. In Eastern Europe, the post-socialist

countries have had no discernible equivalent. Reliance on foreign-owned platforms and supply chains centred in the metropolises of imperialist states will continue in the cycle of platform imperialism (Jin 2015): platforms will capture value for themselves through transaction fees and data collection, and developers from peripheral states will find themselves reliant on the logistical chain that moves their limited money supply abroad.

This, in many ways, illustrates the limitations to the Estonian government's investment and dedication to the development of their local tech industries. The optimism of the post-communist years has reportedly vanished and while "e-stonia" has led to some global successes in hyper-competitive tech markets, inequalities along ethnic, economic, and generational lines continue (Kalmus et al. 2013; Lauristin, Vihalemm 2009). The difficulties that ZA/UM experienced in developing their game entirely within Estonia indicate the depth of these inequalities even for a privileged stratum of digital cultural producers. By contrast, the UK government under New Labour in the high years of the aughts invested heavily in the cultural industries, with mixed results in relation to its goals of "democratizing" cultural production and consumption (Hesmondhalgh *et al.* 2015). Yet, all the same, the size and wealth of the UK and its cultural industries clearly dwarf Estonia's.

To us, this indicates the oft overlooked aspect of video games as labour and logistical chains and complicates the narrative of the game's stated liberatory politics when considering its origins. Even major multinational cultural productions are still heavily biased towards "linguistic and cultural affiliations" (Kerr 2017: 28). Outside of an interventionist state role in redirecting capital flows, the circuit of capital will shape the contours of cultural production towards a specific kind of global commodity: targeted primarily at English-language markets and priced regionally for wealthy countries. Estonia, in its current state, is unlikely to have the power or the political willingness to do this.

MAKING AND DISTRIBUTING RADICAL GAMES: LIMITS, CONTRADICTIONS, POSSIBILITIES

The framing of the "working class" update as a way to get *Disco Elysium* onto the computers of more consumers by reducing the hardware requirements certainly suggests a radical positioning of the game's goals. It could suggest that it is important to get this game's message to more people than before, suggesting a political urgency that goes beyond mere consumerism. It could also suggest a respect of the developers for the working class, acknowledging that the vast majority of people do not have a cutting edge, or even mid-level, gaming PC. Both suggest the importance of radical critique, a key theme in the game.

Theorizing the politics of games from a political or economic perspective is productively started with a discussion of what Dyer-Withieford and de Peuter (2009) referred to as a "game of multitude." Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter discuss a number of what they call "multitudinous pathways" for game development and play. They see games as an important site of contestation of the logics of "Empire," the political economic configuration of capital that captures subjectivities and labour. There are three pathways that we think are relevant for our analysis of DE: tactical games, dissonant development, and software commons. Tactical games are short commentaries on the day's events, by a person or a small team aiming for a statement rather than commercial success. Examples include agitprop games such as Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12th* (Newsgaming 2003) or Molleindustria's *McDonald's: The Video Game* (2006). These games are deeply implicated to then-contemporary academic discussions in game design and game studies around the political possibilities of procedural rhetoric Bogost (2010). Dissonant development, on the other hand, theorized how politically subversive themes and stories were leaking into the development process of many games, be they in the *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami 1999–) franchise or the first *Bio-*

Shock (2K Games 2007). Finally, the software commons is where game production and distribution came up against the then popular act of burning and sharing pirated games, and how developers, publishers, and distributors embraced open source tools but also enforced their copyright through digital rights management tools and platform governance strategies (Schäfer 2011).

None of these pathways really capture the unique political economy of making and distributing a game like Disco Elysium, however. In light of the above, and after its own rhetoric, is *Disco Elysium* a "radical" or "left wing" digital game? Let us examine the three possibilities. First, is it a tactical game? While it is a game with many choices and stories for Harry DuBois (you can make him a hardcore communist, a milquetoast centrist or a race-science obsessed fascist), ultimately the *text* of the game tells a story of sympathy and frustration for revolutionary causes. It is not an uncritical cheerleader of communist revolution, but it saves its rhetorical venom for those who crushed the game's mythologized Revachol Commune and the occupation's imposition of a cruel market liberalism that has accentuated the poverty and racism that still haunts the neighbourhood of Martinaise. Yet, it is an outlier amongst other games that tell similar stories. Tactical games certainly still exist, and many – such as the altgames or "zinester" style productions (Anthropy 2012) – continue to be made with the spread of free, easy-to-use game design tools such as Unity or Twine. Unlike DE, however, they are rarely marketed or sold at scale, keeping them firmly in an oppositional, antagonistic relationship to the digital games marketplace. If they find their way onto distribution platforms like Steam or Itch.io, it's often as a free or a pay-what-you-can model. In other words, what makes this game an exception to the rule of the contemporary gaming landscape, is the unique combination of its "tactical" development process and themes, alongside its full-fledged commercial distribution.

Disco Elysium has much in common with Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's description of "dissonant development," but their original framing focused on big-budget, large scale games that would introduce semi-critical themes such as the dangers of nuclear war, biological engineering, or corporate power run amuck. Such games, while interesting and welcome in many ways, rarely diverged thematically with big-budget or independent Hollywood films, which had for many decades enjoyed a productive relationship with filmmakers willing to at least consider left-wing political themes in their films. The game's themes fit this description. Most notably, the political sympathies of ZA/UM were on display at the 2019 The Game Awards, when writer Helen Hendepere thanked in her acceptance speech for the "Fresh Indie Game" award "some of the great people who came before us" including Karl Marx, Frederich Engels, the Russian painter Vladimir Makovsky, and the Soviet singer-songwriter Viktor Tsoi (Jackson 2019). This is not the first time videogames have advocated for the oppressed either (Nakamura 2017; Mukherjee 2018). What makes it particularly pertinent to our argument, is how the themes of labour, exploitation and poverty resonate with the specific conditions that followed the creation and distribution of the game and its first major update. Yet, DE sits somewhere in between agitprop and AAA production – what has been described by some as "AA" development (Parker 2020) – games with smaller budgets but with aspirational production values. It also, to put it bluntly, is considerably more willing to look directly at contemporary social issues than popular AA games, and name the force that structures them: capitalism.

If not fully fitting thematically or in terms of production to the pathways outlined by Dyer -Withieford and de Peuter, what about its distribution? The software commons of the 2000s have also changed drastically. Once upon a time, it was likely that a game with thematic elements like *Disco Elysium* would have only been available in a less structured and regulated format akin to a commons. Such a game would not have found its way to a console, and

on PC it is unlikely that major retailers of PC games would have carried it. For a long time, even getting one's game onto Steam was quite an ordeal for smaller developers without connections to individuals at Valve. While piracy still exists and open-source or at least nominally free-to-use software plays an important role in the political economy of game production, platforms like Steam, the Epic Game Store, or publisher proprietary distribution platforms like Origin have made piracy less of a concern and less likely to shape business decisions of game development. Fewer computers have disc drives, and torrenting games from popular sites like ThePirateBay is more difficult now with geoblocks in the European Union and elsewhere. In many ways, DE is only able to recoup its production costs (substantial for such a small team) largely because of an increasingly closed and regulated, i.e. platformised, ecosystem structuring cultural production.

This demonstrates that as the political economy of game production has changed so too should our taxonomies. In a recent postscript reflecting on the ten-year anniversary of *Games of Empire*, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2020) discussed the importance of literature in game and media studies on the process of "platformisation" in evaluating the current state of the games industry (Nieborg, Poell 2018). They note that games are increasingly subject to "subsumption" to capital's tendencies while celebrating the supposed "democratization" of production, distribution, and consumption. It is this contradiction – the centrifugal force of centralization and monopolization amidst the centripetal forces of the spread of networked tools that fragment and spread-out cultural production – that we think is most relevant to our analysis of DE's unique position in the political economy of game production.

Here is where contemporary research on the political economy of making culture links up with our analysis. We note two avenues that explore relevant issues: the platformisation of cultural production, and the dynamics of platform imperialism.

Our argument is that a game like DE exemplifies a rare moment in digital media production wherein the creators of cultural commodities can more fully align *content* with *container*. Similar to Bertolt Brecht's (1927) appraisal of radio for its participatory potential or Walter Benjamin's (1936) cautious optimism regarding mass media as means of destabilizing the bourgeois art sensibilities, independent game development has been hailed for its revolutionary potential (Crogan 2018). Yet, it is paradoxically in this specific moment in time that the dual forces of platformisation and imperialism allows for such potential to emerge. In the remainder of the article, we explore these dynamics by drawing on the literature outlined above and a selection of responses from users on platforms, to highlight how such tensions are understood and included into their own discussions of the game's potential as a radical political artwork.

Methodologically, we follow the work on emerging sociotechnical imaginaries relating to the actual and potential uses of new technology (Bucher 2017; Egliston, Carter 2020). While not technologically innovative in itself, the WCU's language hints at ideological innovation within the traditional gaming industry. Looking into the responses to the update allows for discerning and classifying prevalent themes in how audiences (or: usership) see the potential in lowering the game's barrier of entry. To do so, we collected responses from two platforms. First, we read all comments posted on DE's official Steam update (N=211, with 2,245 additional "Rate Up"s). Following our previous claim, the platform has become ubiquitous with PC gaming and is lowering the barrier of entry, contributing to the success of AA games such as itself. Second, we searched for content relevant to the game's update on Reddit, the largest fora collection online. Reddit, with its topical sub-forum, threaded structures and "Karma" points to elevate worthwhile comments provides a good window into the types of discourses arising around topics, particularly those immersed in Internet

culture (Massanari 2013; Richterich 2014). After filtering irrelevant results, we were left with 6 discussion threads, two of which were particularly fruitful, constituting responses to the update's announcement, similar to the comments on Steam: on the official Disco Elysium subreddit (N=50) and the other on the r/Games one (N=147). Based on established principles of online privacy, users have been anonymized and quotes reworded or shortened where possible (Boyd, Crawford 2012; Markham 2012; Highfield, Leaver 2016). The quotes below are thus presented without further identifiers, and unless stated otherwise represent separate comments by distinct users from the collected responses. After immersing ourselves in the material, a thematic coding revealed two contradictory key themes pertinent to the topic of this paper: the congratulatory attitude towards ZA/UM's use of their income from the game to make it more accessible to others, versus concerns over worker exploitation by the company in the fan-translation projects.

THE AA TACTICAL GAME

Central to the response of DE's user base was the admiration for the ethos expressed through the update and the language employed. Similar to our own reading in this paper as a big(ger)-budget take on the tactical game, the predominant response can be expressed, citing one of the commenters, as:

> "Working Class Update"
> of course.

Here, and in similar instances, the commenters recognize ZA/UM borrowing from the revolutionary language of the politics they espouse to comment on the distribution practices of the contemporary gaming industry, with its insatiable appetite for "content," reliance on increasingly manic churn cycles and exploitative labour practices (Greene, Joseph 2015). One commenter admits that they "were excited… about new content, but can't complain for ZA/UM to bring this to more people!"

Another responds to this statement by commenting on the move as "one of the most honourable a gaming company has ever done". In a similar venue, comments call the company "dedicated even after release… and deserving all the praise" or the developers "saints".

Specifically, while some commenters are seemingly happy about their own ability to finally play the game ("tried to play it on my potato but couldn't, now will try again"), most celebrate this as a move to introduce DE's message to new audiences, particularly those not in possession of suitable gaming PCs, not interested in playing games or (in the case of the translation projects) not sufficiently fluent in English to engage with the game's themes. Commenters thank the developers for "making the time to open it for others"; "optimizing this masterpiece for people on a budget so that as many as possible could enjoy this"; or "caring about even the lowest of the PC players so that they might have respite." The outpours are often emotional, running the gamut from the personal "I love this effing company" to the revolutionary "The Working Class MUST come first!" quote attributed to Chairman Mao by a user brandishing a profile picture depicting Lenin. Those comments nonetheless emphasize the contrasting dynamics of centralization versus networked distribution (Dyer-Witheford, de Peuter 2020).

Despite cheering in unison for DE's WCU potential to break the limitations of current gaming practices and appeal to disenfranchised audiences, those discussions occur on two dominant content platforms (Steam and Reddit), potentially subjecting the users to platformised enclosures and policing of the type they rally against (Murakami Wood, Monahan 2019). Moreover, while the proceeds of the game may indeed allow ZA/UM to finance different (liberatory) approaches to localized game development, the game as a whole relies on existing publicity and distribution platforms (headquartered in the global north) specializing in value capture from the attention it generates among fans (Nieborg *et al.* 2020).

Despite its catalysing role as a post-soviet space that nonetheless invested heavily in digital infrastructure, Estonia will not be the (primary) country to reap the benefits of the game's success.

UNPAID TRANSLATORS: BETWEEN DISSONANT DEVELOPER AND THE SOFTWARE COMMONS

A smaller, but vocal subset of responses can be codified as juxtaposing the liberatory Marxist language of the WCU with the practicalities of its secondary objective: the start of further localization projects and the labour conditions of those involved. Specifically, as one user cautiously expresses, they "found it extremely disturbing to use fans' translations instead of real professionals." Another is disappointed since they "hoped ZA/UM would support localization industry workers: (." A third snarkily remarks that while "translators could have benefitted from that hit-game money during global depression… nobody's perfect." Here we see a mounting tension within the two remaining multitudinous pathways: dissonant development and software commons. Some of the game's fans see the translation project in line with Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's (2009) desire for "dissonant development" and their recent (2020) celebration of gaming's apparent democratization. More specifically, in lieu of the pirated software commons of the 2000's, the fandom offers a different kind of non-capitalist means for making and sharing the game with others.

Others are much more critical of this development, seeing it as betraying the game's revolutionary themes. In discussing this issue, particularly in the threaded format of Reddit, the commenters swiftly move away from the game itself, their admiration to the company, or even the specifics of its labour practices and instead turn their eyes to broader struggles of "playbor" (Kücklich 2005), and strife within the industry. As Hammar *et al.* (2020) note, the boundaries between production and consumption have been further blurred in the last decade, while both industry and academia are much keener to point at the (labour) exploitation occurring in games. The commenters are seemingly aware of the market dynamics, pointing simultaneously both to the viability of fan-translation projects as the only way for small studios to keep earnings as well as how fans "get something" out of the process, particularly for "smaller language markets where there's no chance for getting a version otherwise." One redditor expressed a vague desire for "at least a non-monetary compensation," but another – claiming to have relied on crowdfunded localization projects before – immediately scolded them for it:

> How exactly? Are all the fan translators legally register as contractors? Pay taxes from their work? Who gets what? Who's deciding? Who's paying for the management work on ZA/UM side for tracking hundreds of international translators and their output? What about liability? Insurance? Contract breaches? There are tons of similar questions and from our experience, people want to do it for free anyway.

From the comment discussion it becomes clear that while the game might ignite a revolutionary zeal in its players, they remain painfully aware of the dynamics of capital flows in gaming. Here, DE's radical message encounters the realities of its economy and the messy nature within the commons of hobbyist mod making and fan production (Joseph 2018). Just like Harry DuBois's journey, compromise seems to be on the table. Referring to ZA/UM award acceptance speech, one commenter hopes that "a company mentioning Marx and Engels would actually pay its workers." Another almost seems to adopt a radical value extraction approach by pointing out how "there are enough speakers in some languages to find people who'd do it for free." A curt reply underneath this of "why should anyone work for free?" remains unanswered.

CONCLUSION:
A WORKING CLASS GAME

There's a character in DE that you initially identify only as a "working class woman" who seems inconsequential. One of the early options for the player character (pending character traits) is to offer her a hug, empathising with the inherent strife of her class position in industrial Martinaise. Through some actions, the player might uncover a darker, miserable backstory for the woman, learning her name and the tragedy that befell her. Working Class Woman stands in well for the game's Working Class Update. A salutation to the hard working (computers) of the world, and an attempt to open up the game's intriguing universe and emancipatory themes to those unable to play it initially, it runs against the grinding wheels of the game industry's machinery.

In this short contribution, we wanted to highlight how DE – well deserving of its praise as a radical game – is nonetheless embedded in contemporary exploitative practices associated with the gaming industry. We explained this by pointing to the dual dynamics of centralized platform ownership and distributed production tools, and specifically regional variances in creative industry investments, then exemplified it through ZA/UM's ultimate move from Tallinn to London. We investigated how DE fits into three multitudinous pathways of tactical games, dissonant development and software commons, concluding that the changing nature of making games challenges games to fit into each. Finally, we have shown that the game's community is aware of these trends, through an empirical analysis of fans' responses to the company's Working Class Update. The commenters on Steam and Reddit cheer for the revolutionary rhetoric of the update and recognize the company's desire to make the game more accessible to lower-class audiences. At the same time, the comments recognize the inherent problem of using fan labour for the game's translation, while also coming to terms with the limitations of the company in addressing the industry's shortcomings and cost of work.

Ultimately, we see the game as a move into a new generation of tactical AA games – ones characterized by democratized game production tools and access to global markets, yet struggling to maintain independence in light of centralization and monopolies in the industry.

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