

Casual Labor: How *Farmville* (2009) Converges  
Production, Consumption, and Play

by

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*"Social participation is the oil of the digital economy."  
- Trebor Scholz<sup>1</sup>*

*"The consumer is sovereign in a jungle of ugliness, where  
the freedom of choice is imposed on him."  
- Jean Baudrillard<sup>2</sup>*

### **Histories of Play and Labor**

In his short essay "Money for Nothing: Virtual Worlds and Virtual Economies," Steven Shaviro traces what he sees as the historical trajectory for play under capitalism. Citing Max Weber's classic formulation of the ideological conditions for labor under modernity, Shaviro points out how the Fordist regime's adherence to the puritan work ethic was used to strictly separate labor from play; with the former exalted as "salvation" and the latter stigmatized as "diabolical."<sup>3</sup> He continues that it is this dialectical tension that allowed twentieth century theorists such as Johan Huizinga, Roger Callois, and Guy Debord to re-appropriate play as a potential for defiance. Opposed to the strict regimentation and repetition of work on the factory assembly line, these theorists saw play as an irreducibly human activity occurring in a sphere completely separate from the realm of labor.<sup>4</sup> Thus, just as Chaplin's playful dancing and impish attitude in *Modern Times* (1936) literally

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Lang College. "Introduction." The Internet as Factory and Playground: A Conference on Digital Labor. <http://digitallabor.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Consumer Society" in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. (Stanford University Press, 1988), p.43.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Shaviro. "Money for Nothing: Virtual Worlds and Virtual Economies." <http://www.shaviro.com/Othertexts/articles.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, (New York: Beacon, 1971).

Huizinga's notion of "the magic circle" epitomizes this view of play as a place of leisure completely separate from the realm of work.

breaks down the well-oiled operations of the factory machine, Huizinga, Callois, and Debord celebrated play as a kind of necessary agitation– a subversive antidote to the rational structures of a modern, productive society.

But as Alexander Galloway notes in his book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, today, the entire distinction between play and labor has collapsed, problematizing the liberating potential of the former.<sup>5</sup> The broad transformation from Fordist to Post-Fordist economies in late capitalist societies has transformed labor from an activity restricted to the enclosed space of the factory, to a multiplication of activities expanding out into numerous spheres of ambient life in which “all of society is put to work”<sup>6</sup> – often under the auspices of play. This convergence takes on its perhaps most literal instantiation in the discourse surrounding online video games, in which the rhetoric of this new labor is often framed by its absence. Shying away from any discussion of how play in online, corporate spaces has often been appropriated as “free labor” without consent from the cloud, marketing campaigns for online video games instead emphasize playful empowerment through catchphrases like interactivity, individuality, customizability, and freedom of choice. As the latest installment in the rise of the niche consumer, this suturing of the neoliberal rhetoric of choice, freedom, and individuality to play and “interactivity” has also acted as another means to disavow control and banalize labor, especially as it shifts from the material realm of the

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<sup>5</sup> Alex Galloway. "Ch. 3 - Social Realism" in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene Lang College, “Introduction.”

factory to the more abstract realm of flickering signifiers on computer screens.<sup>7</sup> And with the popular advent of web 2.0 spaces for the production and distribution of “user-generated content,” corporations have even learned to expropriate value from many aspects of daily life previously attributed to play. For, as data mining in these spaces is increasingly used as a common tool to monetize personal data into a commodity for advertising companies,<sup>8</sup> nearly all online activities, from “sexual desire to boredom to friendship... become fodder for speculative profit.”

All of these contemporary tropes are, thus, not so much about the disappearance of labor (in the traditional Marxian sense, much, though certainly not all, of this work has been outsourced to developing nations), but of the transference of its rational productivity (albeit in new forms) to the realm of play and consumption.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it is by co-opting the smooth veneer and slippery signifiers of “play” that contemporary labor can hide under playfulness, and play can become more laborious, allowing Julian Kücklich to coin the neologism “play-bor.”<sup>10</sup>

There is perhaps no better space to investigate these historically situated convergences of work and play than the free-to-play (f2p), browser-based game *Farmville* (2009), created by the casual games company Zynga. Played through a user’s Facebook account, *Farmville* is a massively multiplayer online game (MMO) which allows users to cultivate land, plant and harvest crops, decorate personal farms, buy consumer items, and interact with other players in what is essentially

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<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard, pp. 29-56.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene Land College, “Introduction.”

<sup>9</sup> Eugene Lang College, “Introduction.”

<sup>10</sup> Julian Kücklich. “Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry” in *Fibreculture*, no. 5, September 2005. <http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/kucklich.html>.

nothing more than a “game about farming.”<sup>11</sup> And yet, while this initial taxonomy of possible activities may seem to describe a game which is incredibly boring,

*Farmville* has literally become the most popular video game in America.

Astonishingly, its seventy-three million users have even surpassed the number of players attached to *World of Warcraft* (1994-2010) and the Nintendo Wii (2006).<sup>12</sup>

But even despite this massive popularity, *Farmville* remains an interesting case study for the convergence of play, consumption, and labor precisely because of the way it integrates all three so nefariously on the levels of representation, game mechanic, and political economy.

### **Nostalgia and Laborious Play**

In a much publicized talk at the 2010 DICE Conference,<sup>13</sup> game designer and Carnegie Mellon professor Jesse Schell describes what he sees as an increasing trend towards nostalgia for “the real” in the contemporary games market - a real which he claims has been displaced in an age of mass mediation and ubiquitous information technologies. According to Schell, while so-called “hardcore” video games have been preoccupied for decades with questions of fantasy and escape, these new, more “casual” games simulate a return to the real on two fronts: nostalgia for connection to “nature” and nostalgia for “authentic” human connection.<sup>14</sup> Although we will

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<sup>11</sup> A.J. Patrick Liskiewicz. “Cultivated Play: Farmville.” Kotaku.  
<http://kotaku.com/5521250/cultivated-play-farmville>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Jesse Schell, “Design Outside the Box” (video presented at 2010 DICE Conference, Las Vegas, Nevada, February 18, 2010) <http://g4tv.com/videos/44277/dice-2010-design-outside-the-box-presentation>. “DICE” stands for Design, Innovate, Communicate, Entertain.

<sup>14</sup> Schell’s arguments are, of course, textbook Baudrillardian hyperreality. Just as Disneyland’s fantasy was able to make other constructed spaces look more real by

explore this second aspect in more detail later, it is interesting to note the way in which this fantasy of returning to the rural earth, tilling the soil of the Heartland (or what Fox News might even call “the real America”), gets mapped onto the concept of labor in *Farmville*. For, in a fashion so startlingly direct that its tone borders on irony, *Farmville* utilizes new forms of post-industrial playbor in order to simulate, and retroactively also make playful and empowering, older mythologies surrounding work.

This nostalgia for ‘real labor’ is actualized in an environment of “agrarian cuteness,”<sup>15</sup> which surprisingly, draws on a long history of farming simulations in video games. Earlier games like *Harvest Moon* (1996), *Rune Factory* (2006), and *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (1992), all featured farming simulations that were to varying degrees central to game progression or ancillary side quests. However, according to many game critics, what makes *Farmville* unique as a farming simulation is the utter banality of its gameplay mechanic.<sup>16</sup> To hoe a patch, you click on a square; to plant a seed, you click on a square; to harvest your crop, you click on a square. This three-clicks-per-square process is literally the core game mechanic for *Farmville*, and in its execution, one can easily imagine how the routine of planting and harvesting even a relatively small patch of squares (i.e. 14 x 14 = over six-hundred clicks) can start to give a player carpal tunnel.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in almost a

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comparison, the simulated fantasies of *World of Warcraft* also make *Farmville*'s pixilated plants and dirt look strangely more realistic.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Arrington. “Scamville: The Social Gaming Ecosystem of Hell.” Tech Crunch. <http://techcrunch.com/2009/10/31/scamville-the-social-gaming-ecosystem-of-hell>.

<sup>16</sup> Liskiewicz.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

parody of the Post-Fordist condition, *Farmville's* gameplay represents older labor while simulating newer labor in the machinic space particular to the contemporary convergence of work and play. Inevitably, it is through *Farmville* that the space of the computer screen, the arena of both Post-Fordist leisure and work,<sup>18</sup> allegorizes its own operations of power.

Writing from the perspective of the Frankfurt School, Julian Stallabrass has detailed specifically how video game play internalizes and reproduces these structures of labor production. Drawing on Theodor Adorno's incredibly prescient vision of how labor infiltrates and restructures free time in its own image, Stallabrass argues that button mashing in computer games "produces in the player a simulacrum of industrial work," with the "autonomy of each action, its repetition, precise timing and rare completion"<sup>19</sup> working to structure the body as a "fragmented, allegorized, and reified self under the conditions of capital."<sup>20</sup> Stallabrass' descriptions take on particular significance when seen in the context of *Farmville's* notoriously boring and tedious play. While many role-playing games, for instance, feature frustrating patches of playtime in which repetitive and time consuming actions are necessary for advancement, the act of "level grinding" in these games is often seen as a necessary means to gain experience points to advance through harder and harder challenges in the narrative. In *Farmville*, "the grind" of labor is continuous and consistent – there is no acquisition of new abilities that allow for the exercise of new potentials, and the level of difficulty and range of

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<sup>18</sup> Julian Stallabrass. "Just Gaming: Allegory and Economy in Computer Games" in *New Left Review*, no. 198, March-April 1993, pp. 83-106.

<sup>19</sup> Stallabrass, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

possible actions remains the same throughout the game.<sup>21</sup> As the player invests more time and play-labor in the game, she can earn Farm Gold from her crops which she can spend in a plethora of different ways: to increase the size of her virtual property, customize her farm with various elements, or buy machines such as tractors which decrease her work load. And yet for all the myriad rewards the player can directly cull from hard work, the nature of play remains unchallenging, governed only by an increased (and increasingly substantial) commitment in temporal investment.

Such laborious play would seem to be anathema to the very definition of gameplay, but because *Farmville* structures its core play mechanic around a system of extrinsic rewards (rewards outside the realm of play), it is able to use these rewards as a cheerful veneer to what is in fact an interface which inherently devalues the act of play into labor.<sup>22</sup> Thus, while, initially, there may be the implied hope that present-day grinding and the accompanying accumulation of property and goods will eventually lead to uninhibited play in the future, much of the irony of the game lies in the fact that more property necessitates more labor and care. And because *Farmville* operates according to a real time schedule, as opposed to an in-game, internal clock, the game is built to manage free time and attention by incentivizing the player to come back at shorter and shorter intervals, thereby privileging and rewarding obsessive play in a strange combination of agency and

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<sup>21</sup> Chris Remo. "GDC: Hecker's Nightmare Scenario – A Future of Rewarding Players for Dull Tasks." Gamasutra. [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/27646/GDC\\_Heckers\\_Nightmare\\_Scenario\\_A\\_Future\\_Of\\_Rewarding\\_Players\\_For\\_Dull\\_Tasks.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/27646/GDC_Heckers_Nightmare_Scenario_A_Future_Of_Rewarding_Players_For_Dull_Tasks.php).

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to my CTIN 462 professor, William Huber, for this concept.

control. In the words of one critic, the situation of play in *Farmville* is much like a kid being bribed with pizza to do his homework<sup>23</sup> – through a causal system of work-and-reward, play as work is seen only as a means to an end. And if proliferating rewards can only come attached to proliferating responsibilities and social obligations towards those properties, it is clear that *Farmville* mirrors the condition of subjectivity under contemporary consumer capitalism.

### **Consumerism and Identity Labor**

Because *Farmville* is predicated on a structure of dull, repetitious labor rewarded only by the amount of time and effort the player directly invests into the game, it draws heavily on the mythical structuring of labor and reward conceptualized by the American Dream. Unlike most other games which privilege players who are able to solve intellectually challenging puzzles or display complex feats of manual dexterity, *Farmville* incentivizes the individual hard worker who grinds away at predictable labor by taunting him with the promise of equally predictable rewards: new drapes for the house, a new cat for the barn, a larger property. And yet, because the tasks are easier and almost wholly dependent on the player's individual labor investment, and because it provides a wide array of rewards from which to choose, *Farmville* constructs a fantasy of individual empowerment and freedom of choice, despite the clear ways in which the game mechanic manages player action and attention. As *Farmville* houses its operations on the social networking site Facebook, this simulation of freedom of choice is

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<sup>23</sup> Remo.

directly related to the work involved in customizing a player's online profile identity.

Appropriating danah boyd's conceptual framework for looking at social networks, I would argue that grinding in *Farmville* is a productive activity precisely because the rewards it generates relate specifically to the work of social capital aggregation and identity construction already existing on the Facebook platform.<sup>24</sup> Although discourses surrounding status and distinction certainly apply to other networked, fantasy contexts (such as in *World of Warcraft*), the labor surrounding the aggregation of virtual items in *Farmville* is directly related to the player's photographic "avatar" on Facebook – which, according to boyd, is a social networking site that displays a comparatively high congruence between online and offline identity.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in addition to the customizability and personalization of the player's profile available through the regular Facebook platform, *Farmville* gives the player the opportunity to add game property to their personal walls in virtual displays of conspicuous consumption. As Rebekah Willett suggests, this allows *Farmville* players to act as *bricoleurs* of their own identity, appropriating and recontextualizing virtual consumer items as signifiers of their varied lifestyles and ideologies.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> danah boyd, "Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life" in *MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume*, edited by David Buckingham, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> boyd, pp. 13-15.

<sup>26</sup> Rebekah Willett, "Consumer Citizens Online: Structure, Agency, and Gender in Online Participation." In *MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning – Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume*, edited by David Buckingham, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007), pp. 49-70.

It should be obvious, then, that these rhetorics of individual empowerment and freedom of choice built into the marketing schemes (and programmed code) for *Farmville*, Facebook, and other Web 2.0 phenomena are often commensurate with a neoliberal construction of consumer identity.<sup>27</sup> With equal ability to contribute, create, and “level up” through the social ladder, the neoliberal, individualist subject, like the *Farmville* player, knows nothing of boundaries or structural inequalities; only that he is free to buy what he pleases, and pull himself up by the labor of his own bootstraps. But ironically, it is in the context of *Farmville*, that the gospel surrounding the supposed freedoms of play in neoliberalism and interactive media begins to unravel, as the laborious, structured, and controlling aspects of the game play also begin to reveal themselves.

Here, it seems appropriate to invoke Baudrillard’s early essay “Consumer Society,” which, perhaps more than any other theorist I have cited thus far, conceptualizes this convergence between production, consumption, and play in prescient ways. Although Baudrillard critiques the classical Marxist emphasis on production to shift towards a new emphasis on consumption, it is important to remember that, for Baudrillard, “consumption takes up the logical and necessary relay from production.”<sup>28</sup> While production may have been the key organizing and rationalizing structure of social life during the industrial era, Baudrillard claims that the new mode of social control has shifted to consumption, which he explicitly states is “the field of play.”<sup>29</sup> As in the interrelation between the playful rhetorics of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-51.

<sup>28</sup> Baudrillard, p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> Baudrillard, pp. 51-58.

neoliberalism and Web 2.0 interactivity that we discussed earlier, Baudrillard's playful consumer-subject is fundamentally based in the production of an impression of choice and freedom. And if, as Baudrillard suggests, the architecture which most epitomizes this impression of choice is the shopping mall, it bears mentioning that, for boyd, the mall was also the clearest predecessor to hangout sites for youth in the 1980s and 90s prior to the advent of Facebook.<sup>30</sup> As equally consumerist spaces, both Facebook and shopping malls provide spaces where choice, play, and freedom are in constant tension with the work of identity management, exploitation, and control.

Thus, although *Farmville* provides an array of consumer objects to choose from as rewards for its laborious play, in Baudrillardian fashion, these objects are nothing but a network of interchangeable signs whose play of signification creates an endless loop of desire for the consumer. By existing within the networked realm of Facebook, the public display of virtual consumer items that play in *Farmville* provides do indeed serve the purpose of self-regulation and integration within the group. In fact, as each player displays her private property publically and accordingly adjusts her identity under the control of what boyd calls "impression management,"<sup>31</sup> she is integrated into the consumerist regime of neoliberal subjects, and the network of signs and ideologies which self-regulate and constitute it.

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<sup>30</sup> boyd, p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> boyd, pp. 11-13.

### Surveillance, Data Mining, and Software as Ideology

If, in the new, networked regime of control, the traces of personal data have become the new capital, the continuous management of identity in social networking sites becomes laborious not only in the interest of the user's aggregation of social capital, but also as a productive activity for those marketing firms looking to extract free R & D research.

Although the strategies used by Zynga to collect this data are numerous, one of the methods that has proven most successful (particularly in the case of younger players) has been the integration of so-called "lead generation" surveys into gameplay. Very similar to the strategies discussed by Ellen Seiter in her critical analysis of the earlier, online children's game *Neopets* (1999),<sup>32</sup> *Farmville* actually one-ups its predecessor by privileging these lead generation surveys over the core game mechanic. Appearing as friendly questions asked by cute-and-cuddly characters within the game, these surveys ask players their opinions in the interest of extracting free marketing research in exchange for large amounts of in-game virtual currency. Frequently, these characters will also further incentivize children to provide their own or their parents' contact information, which, according to comments on *Farmville* message boards, are incredibly difficult mailing lists to get off of.<sup>33</sup> In framing these surveys as an opportunity for players to get more Farm Cash, and further, by promoting these surveys as an opportunity to gain Farm Cash far more quickly than through the laborious grind of the core "three-clicks" game

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<sup>32</sup> Ellen Seiter. "Ch. 5: Virtual Pets – Devouring the Children's Market" in *The Internet Playground*, (Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 83-100.

<sup>33</sup> Remo.

mechanic, *Farmville* situates players in the uncomfortable position of having to choose between hard-won success through laborious play and an immediate rise to virtual fortune through filling out disguised consumer surveys. By casually divesting their personal information and/or thoughts on various consumer questions, players of these surveys, in effect, reify their online selves into information commodities to be bought and sold by marketers eager to exploit crowdsourced, and thus far more wide-ranging, diverse, and accurate, consumer information.<sup>34</sup>

Although lead generation surveys remain an important part of Zynga's self-confessed strategy to "fuck the users,"<sup>35</sup> they are not necessarily the main strategy that *Farmville* has used to extract economic value from the act of play. Rather, more often without the expressed consent of the player, Zynga (in conjunction with the complicity of Facebook) has cultivated a nasty habit of practicing surveillance on their users, invisibly mining their personal data in the interest of selling it to advertisers. But if all of our prior discussion has focused solely on discussions of play-labor at the level of the interface, how can we begin to deal with those exploitative strategies used by games which lie embedded within the machinic substrate? How can we begin to critique the expropriation of value from personal data traces when this operation is wholly invisible to the user's "naked eye"?

As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun notes in her essay "On Software: Or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge," this potential for the exercise of computational surveillance as a kind of productive activity lies in the political ontology of the computer. Defining the computer as an ideological object *par excellence*, Chun

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<sup>34</sup> Kucklich.

<sup>35</sup> Arrington.

argues that software presents something of a paradox - it simultaneously seems to be completely transparent in its working and yet the majority of its machinic processes remain encapsulated and invisible to the user. For Chun, this disconnect between surface and depth, software and hardware operates as an artificial construction of ideology, in that, just as ideology represents our imaginary relationship to the real, "software represents our imaginary relationship to hardware."<sup>36</sup> Thus, if software, like ideology, relies on a vertical, depth model of "false consciousness," hiding processes just as often as it seems to reveal them, it also breeds a peculiar kind of disempowerment, relegating agency to the machine just as often as the user is ironically made to feel empowered.

In embedding data mining, intelligent networking algorithms, and personal profile capture into the everyday playful activities of *Farmville* and the Facebook platform on which it operates, Zynga has, therefore, taken this notion of "software as ideology" and extended it to the point hypertrophy. By quite literally hiding the expropriation of value and the act of labor in the computer's machinic site of production (which, in classical Marxist fashion, is always hidden from view), *Farmville* performs a stunning ideological reversal: on the interface level, the user is made to feel like the heroic, playful, and autonomous master of her own machine, while underneath it all, she is reduced to and exploited for the spectacle of her own data. Of course, all of this blatant exploitation of play is, in the end, executed in the name of providing the consumer with a more customized and personalized online

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<sup>36</sup> Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. "On Software: Or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge," JSTOR: Grey Room, No. 18 (Winter, 2004), pp. 27.

shopping experience. Under the auspices of empowering the consumer, such crowdsourced data mining is said to provide the impetus for more intelligent marketing algorithms which provide you with an idea of “you” which is totally custom made - perfectly tailored to the idea of commodities that you must want. Softening surveillance by positioning it as a necessary means to construct the user’s own customized shopping experience, *Farmville*’s convergence of consumption as production and play as the creation of free value for proprietary interests situates it as a perfect example of what Tiziana Terranova has called “free labor” – a new, more banal and playful version of work, specific to the age of computer networking.<sup>37</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, despite its benevolent labeling as a mere “casual” game, *Farmville* raises a number of questions related to new configurations of play and labor which are specific to the political ontology of web 2.0 computer networks. For one, how can users be sure of the integrity of their play experiences, if there is always the possibility that this play can be used as fodder for exploitation? Or, as Trebor Sholz puts it in his introduction to “The Internet as Playground and Factory,” what does it mean for the distinction between waged and unwaged labor to be largely indistinguishable, particularly when it is difficult to know when one is and is not laboring?<sup>38</sup> And finally, and perhaps most importantly, what does it mean when we devalue the potential of play as a category of opposition to labor and exploitation, as a space of freedom, or even as a tactic for political subversion? Inevitably, for just “a

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<sup>37</sup> Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy.” Electronic Book Review.

<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/technocapitalism/voluntary>

<sup>38</sup> Eugene Lang College, “Introduction.”

game about farming,” it is striking how *Farmville* in raising these questions about so-called “interactive media,” posits a space not unlike Baudrillard’s consumerist dystopia that pivots on the contradiction of simultaneous control and freedom. For, if *Farmville* is a game which is marketed on the promise of providing an endless buffet of choices to the player, it is interesting how this freedom of choice for the user is always configured as a “freedom of choice...imposed on him.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Baudrillard, p. 43.

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