

Surviving Millionaire City: Class Consciousness, Vertigo, and Empire in Browser Based Games

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A critical aspect of the serious games movement has been the premise that games are not merely commercial products of leisure, but that they also have the potential to educate and persuade (Gee, 2007; Shafer, 2006; Bogost, 2010). Succinctly put: games, more than any other medium, can produce social change. Therefore, it is important to consider the interpretive strategies that players take when playing games that contain messages that run contrary to their social conditions and political beliefs. How does one situate oneself as a subject when taking part in a game that is overtly political?

In order to address this question, this paper will investigate the rationale of casual *Tiny Tower* and *Millionaire City* players, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork obtained during a two year Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) funded study in Philadelphia. These games are political: players assume the role of a landlord who manages (shuffles, evicts, and solicits) tenants for an apartment building. The player's goals are explicitly in line with Hardt and Negri's (2000) theses on Empire. Success in *Millionaire City* and *Tiny Tower* is achieved through the skillful management of bodies (biopower), and measured through the accumulation of capital. Tellingly, these thematic motifs in commercial videogames have also been critiqued by Dyer-Witherford and dePeuter (2010) for their close-knit ties to Empire's machinations. But, unfortunately, prior research on this problem only addresses the production of games. For this reason, this paper instead focuses on the reception and audience of *Tiny Tower* and *Millionaire City* in an effort to fill the gaps in the scaffolding of these critical frameworks. What are the recuperative and reciprocal aspects of these games of empire?

The players observed and interviewed for this study are participants at Philadelphia's broadband access centers and digital training programs, or "keystops." Their interest in browser based games was observed during fieldwork. Ironically, many of the players observed— although subject to precarious living conditions — seem to delight in the perpendicular worlds of casual games like *Tiny Tower* and *Millionaire City*. Although this paper argues that these games simulate and reproduce the social and political conditions that have thrust these players into any number of precarious living condition, it will turn a critical eye to the rationale of these players; providing a thick description exactly what recuperative aspects these games may bring to their everyday lives.

In providing this thick description, this paper will explore issues of class consciousness, the digital divide, and the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideals in casual games. Apart from these critical themes, it will also consider Caillois' (2001) idea of vertigo in play. Although vertigo is frequently considered an theme which runs contrary to many of the more formal mechanisms of game design (chance, simulation, and competition), this research shall provide evidence to the ways in which vertigo might serve to help players understand and negotiate their social conditions, and political being.

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