

Capitalist Surrealism: Grind, Loot Boxes, and the Work of the Looter Shooter

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ABSTRACT:

The last decade has seen the rise of a mini-genre of digital games colloquially known as 'looter shooters'. Looter shooters such as the games in the *Borderlands* series swamp the player with guns, cash, armour and powerups to the point that an important game mechanism becomes converting the loot into liquid capital at various in-game repositories. Aside from the garish critique of late-capital overproduction, the endless fountain of ordnance and flashy goods is a 'grind' of its own which requires the player to perform labour to sort out the best loot. This article also formulates a theory of grind based on the mechanics of opening loot boxes. Although gacha can tempt the player to gamble on exciting mystery loot containers, by contrast, the grind is all about the predictable and the mundane, where narrative fails to appear on the horizon. The looter shooter continually upends the possibility of story, seamlessly deploying a twin grind/gacha mechanic to obviate both narrative and game, flattening it all into unlosable, yet 'unwinnable' work.

KEY WORDS:

accumulation, *Borderlands*, disaster capitalism, FPS, gacha, grind, late capital, lootboxes, looter shooter, narratology, procedurality, roguelite.

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Introduction

Weapons are like money: no one knows the meaning of enough.

– Martin Amis, *Einstein's monsters*

Fisher's (2009) declaration that "capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics" (p. 4) rings especially true for digital games known as 'looter shooters', with lone warriors struggling through the remains of hyperactive material production, waste, and decay. The release of the first *Borderlands* (Gearbox Software, 2009) title introduced this particular form of shooter which incorporates a distinct mix of pray-and-spray mechanics, tons of treasure and guns, lightning-fast pacing and cartoony aesthetics. Other examples of the looter shooter include *Destiny 2* (Bungie, 2017), *Risk of Rain 2* (Hopoo Games, 2019), *The Cycle: Frontier* (Yager Development, 2022), *The Ascent* (Neon Giant, 2021) and *Warframe* (Digital Extremes, 2013). This term has so far been loosely applied as a generic label to describe the titles already mentioned (and many more), but there are still the unanswered questions of what looter shooters *do* in terms of gameplay and their tweaking of traditional 'shooter' game dynamics. The primary distinguishing feature of the looter shooter, that of *loot*, subsequently organises the order and priorities of gameplay, and subordinates everything else to it. As such, the preponderance of loot and the mechanic of its discovery in 'loot boxes' substantially compromise the prospects for digital game narrative; the constant stream of low-grade suspense in opening loot boxes supplants any narrative tension provided by story beats. Loot thus becomes the sole dramatic fulcrum of both the procedure of gameplay and the unfolding of narrative.

With the looter shooter, the judiciously paced reward structure of a typical FPS game is blunted by the player's ever-present search for the next loot box. Even further, the looter shooter can short-circuit the idea of in-game priorities and strategy by allowing the gacha conventions of gaming to loom larger than any story. This is thus an extension of the loot box convention to carry the player through the game space by obviating in-game labour. By the same token, the acquisition and management of so much loot accumulated over time by the player threatens to tip the balance of the game experience toward 'grinding', namely playing with a view to accumulation as an end in itself. As Galloway observed, the realism of digital games resides in "revisiting the material substrate of the medium and establishing correspondences with specific activities existent in the social reality of the gamer" (2006, p. 84). In this sort of game, the excessiveness of the game's distribution of both rewards and challenges distorts the usual balance of combat-based games, and in the case of the typical rogue-like, the difficulty should be enough to enthrall and also disappoint the player: the 'psychology' of the genre intends to crush the player into a state of grief and futility (Szabados et al., 2023). Yet, in the looter shooter, the rogue-like elements are reversed, such that the concepts of 'obstacle' and 'desire' are altered completely; each game space throws preposterously large hordes of enemies at the player, who is still able to dispatch them easily and nonchalantly with their preferred style of firearm. In this study, we shall also look at the RPG roots of the looter shooter, along with a consideration of the loot box as the motif for this style of digital game, whether virtual or real currency (as with gacha) is at stake. We shall also consider the world and narratives of the *Borderlands* (Gearbox Software et al., 2009-2022) series in particular, and its thematic definition of the looter shooter as a site for wallowing in the ravages of extraction capitalism. Along the way, we argue everything the looter shooter does is an expression of the grind aspects of digital games, an inevitable consequence of the looter shooter's surrender of narrative tension to the ever-present lure of loot, itself the cast-off detritus of the capitalist landscape.

Characteristics of the Looter Shooters

In the spirit of what Cartlidge (2024) calls the 'prototype theory' grounded in the experience of a game genre, I propose the following earmarks of this newly named genre of game. The looter shooter is a hybrid of various digital game genres centred around combat, whether presented in a first-person, third-person, or isometric gameplay perspective. Though the looter shooter contains elements of the roguelike, roguelite, traditional RPGs, the classic first-person shooter, and the coin-op arcade shoot 'em up, in hard-and-fast terms it is a rogue-derived game with shooter elements lacking a turn-based system of play. A key idea of looter shooter gameplay is that of *speed* above all else; no matter how many traditional RPG elements are present, there are no real allowances made for strategy or contemplation. The results of combat are seen in real time, usually with arcade-style numbers floating above the enemy hordes to indicate damage. The player character of a looter shooter is invariably embodied in a class: typical ones are the generic soldier, the heavy gunner, the explosives expert, the stealth-based martial artist skilled with melee weapons, and so on. Gameplay can be either cooperative or single-player: franchises and standalone environments such as *Destiny 2*, *Borderlands* and *Warframe* can be played in cooperative mode, and the team ethic can make the whole enterprise seem like a

dungeon-crawling adventure with a classic “D&D party”. As in an RPG, a player character levels up by earning experience points through repeated success in combat. Depending on the game, XP can be funnelled through skill trees by acquiring points through combat and the achievement of benchmarks or mission objectives.

Though the description above conforms fairly well to the broad idea of the generic shooter, there are at least five significant factors that distinguish looter shooters from other similar digital games:

1. A pre-emptive collapsing of game narrative possibilities into simple game-state resolutions, always about dispatching the next enemy or opening the next loot box. Aarseth (2014) has suggested that the ludological-narratological divide is erased with the ‘interchangeable’ nature of violent games, and in this instance, the looter shooter would seem to be an ideal example of this, given that both combat and its reward structure tend to be both repetitive in quality and overwhelming in volume. According to the “Berlin Interpretation” from the International Roguelike Development Conference (Lait, 2008), which outlined the basic characteristics for roguelike games, the procedural generation of a rogue game world should allow for the emergence of different solutions to complete levels. In addition, the perpetual repopulation of the gamespace with enemies and other obstacles provides constantly renewed challenges, playthrough after playthrough. This accommodation of varying approaches is part of the looter shooter’s essential character as a fluid game environment that has relatively few immutable narrative markers to achieve. The distinct lack of iconic weaponry to achieve in-game goals (for example, the Master Sword in the *Legend of Zelda* [Nintendo, 1986-2023] series) underscores the dim possibility of a looter shooter mimicking a narrative-heavy quest structure. The narrative base-note of the looter shooter is to encourage players to run-and-gun no matter what, with little overall attention to narrative impacts. For example, the *Risk of Rain 2* HUD gauge tracking enemy difficulty constantly reminds the player to ruthlessly balance the operation of picking up loot and powerups with finding the portal to exit the level; if a player takes too long collecting loot, they could potentially face an insurmountable boss fight. Therefore, the environment of this game cannot typically be fully *explored* at the player’s leisure, a clear break with roguelike and some roguelite conventions.
2. A scarcity of ‘savability’, such that the player can only save at certain points and location markers on the map, a convention shared with roguelites in general, which do not permit the player multiple save slots within one playthrough for specific game states. The player continues where they left off and returns to the same state when they come back, picking up at or near the same save point. The rhetoric of savability is such that the ‘life’ of the player, and not the game state or the narrative decisions made at that point in the world, is the only entity worth ‘saving’. The world is eternally in the same infinitely replayable state, with new crops of revived enemies to be slaughtered.
3. Generosity, excess, and ultimate ease in the progression of play. Unlike an arcade exercise, where the player can be stuck forever at one point due to a lack of skill, with a typical looter shooter the player is practically guaranteed to succeed as long as they persist. The familiar pay-to-win dynamic of freemium mobile games can be present, and also taken as a suggestion that the looter shooter *desires* the player to succeed. Baerg (2012) described the rational nature of risk through D&D player decision making, weighing the ‘costs and benefits’ of certain actions. Whenever a typical roguelite game is saved and restarted, the player finds its world re-populated with new enemies to fight on rejoining the game. Similarly, roguelites differ from roguelikes in that a player character’s items and powers can carry over from run to

run. This is also why looter shooters are rich team-play environments; in fighting those teeming hordes, there is more than enough of the labour of slaughter to go around, as the baddies burst with loot like so many piñatas.

4. Narrative is dictated by accumulation of points and levelling up. The weapons and other artifacts of the looter shooter are irrelevant to the game's pacing. With *Borderlands*, players are sometimes bequeathed weapons and armour of too high a level for them to use (a convention *Cyberpunk 2077* [CD Projekt RED, 2020] also observes), giving the players an incentive to keep playing and growing more powerful so that they can aspire to deploy their new toys. This is not a convention in an immersion sim, where weapons (the gravity gun in *Half-Life 2* [Valve, 2004], as well as the fully-assembled portal gun in *Portal* [Valve, 2007]) are given to the player only when narratively appropriate, given the problems that need these tools in order to solve them. At the same time, owing to the acceptance of different play styles, there is no true quest item to be used as a weapon in *Borderlands*, even though all weapons in loot boxes are procedurally (and therefore uniquely) generated.
5. The looter shooter characteristically takes place in an environment marked by 'disaster capitalism', Klein's (2007) famous label for exploitation endemic to neoliberal capitalism as its most basic level. Although the looter shooter concept can be set in any game world, the looter shooter typically takes place in a ruined world already depleted by the machinations of capital or empire, the plunder always already committed by corporate avarice. The fabula of *Borderlands 2* (Gearbox Software, 2012a) explicitly turns on the ascendancy of the Hyperion Corporation, fuelled by the mining of Eridium, the magic purple substance that can be used as both a weapon and currency for trade. The player in this series entry is lured to its Vault, a storied repository of alien weapons technology promising riches beyond everyone's wildest dreams, by taking part in a rebellion against Handsome Jack, a former Hyperion temp employee turned its sadistic CEO. The player character in *The Ascent* takes the position of a humble sewage worker leading a counterforce against warring factions out to seize power in the massive, decaying corporate 'arcology' they all inhabit. Similarly, even a game such as *Destiny 2* traces the narrative arc of a re-conquest of the wreckage of rusting wartime capital production, with missions oriented toward fighting back against the alien menace blocking human exploration of the solar system.

The characteristics of the looter shooter listed above are easy to recognize, and although rigid boundaries do not fully suit this nascent genre whose qualities were buried within the conventions of the roguelike, the RPG, and the shooter, the overall spirit of the looter shooter is that of an adventure game grounded in accumulation as its primary attraction. We will revisit this last point, that of disaster capitalism at the end of our study as it betrays the most telling detail of the looter shooter: the endless stream of cast-off and second-hand goods, the surfeit of powerups, and the spectacle of capital's self-consumption.

Loot: The Original Sin of the RPG

In all, the ordering of play through loot in the looter shooter overwhelms and minimises all its other aspects. A study published in 2020 asserted that around 56 to 59% of the top selling mobile games on all mobile platforms featured loot boxes, compared to

36% for desktop games (Zendle et al., 2020). The production and maintenance of game titles often depends on the developer catering to the desires of players funnelled through loot box content in order to keep them engaged: “compared to Triple-A game development, mobile game development and circulation are much more intertwined and form a constant feedback-loop rather than the more linear production-circulation process” (Nieborg, 2015, p. 234). As Baerg (2012) has noted, the aspirational characteristic of loot itself is evident with the non-narrative quality of weapons acquisition. According to Cole (2020), the procedural generation of *Borderlands* loot boxes constantly threatens to upset the balance of play by giving out either too-powerful weaponry, or redundant or under-powered ones. The plenitude of loot available in the looter shooter hearkens back to one of the dilemmas present during the emergence of TTRPGs in the 1970s – how much loot should a Dungeon Master provide and how much is too much? And when does the presence of loot begin to compromise the project of running a compelling campaign?

The idea of the Monty Haul DM, a dungeon master who would allow players to have maximum treasure for sometimes minimal effort, is one present from the very early days of TTRPG culture. By punningly referencing the famous long-time host of *Let's Make a Deal* (Hatos, et al., 1963-present), the name also invokes the idea of winning big or losing in an embarrassing fashion with little in the way of skill or decision-making mechanics. James Ward earned the “Monty Haul” nickname from Gary Gygax himself after Gygax criticised Ward’s liberal distribution of loun stones and magical sashes to a party of first-level starter characters (Ward, 2019). Ward nevertheless embraced this moniker, writing a long-running column in *The Dragon* magazine under this nickname. Some of the campaigns described in the column featured imaginative, exotic, highly contrived narratives with routine god-fighting; one extreme campaign freely offered powerful weaponry for the party to use against a group of fifteen gods from the Norse pantheon (Ward, 1978). In one of the early texts on fantasy RPG gaming, Galloway (1982) perceptively remarks that the opposite of a too-generous DM would be one who liquidated most of their players in short order, forcing the latter group to cheat: “players will appear with wonderfully high level characters they ‘just happen to have.’ Either way, the game suffers and both [DM] and players rapidly lose interest” (p. 100). If a sufficient number of obstacles is needed in order to make players feel the struggle of a game experience is worthwhile, by contrast a game where every obstacle, no matter how slight, bears a reward compromises the very idea of that struggle’s value. As a result, the looter shooter often resembles an overactive, colourful slot machine where every move is a winning one, with numbers and icons flying through the air at the player.

The conventions of loot are further complicated by the presence of in-game chances to open special loot boxes, sometimes requiring the player to use real money to buy them, effectively providing players with gacha-style play options. Drummond et al. (2020) assert that the mere opening of loot boxes can be enough to stimulate the player’s happiness, regardless of the action of the game they are playing. The *Borderlands 2* DLC *Tiny Tina’s Assault on Dragon Keep* (Gearbox Software, 2013) even places a pair of giant 20-sided dice on top of special loot chests such that the player has an explicit aleatory role in deciding the outcome of a chest’s contents. With *Warframe* (which can be played otherwise for free) one can purchase items with real money, representing the player’s efforts to pay-to-win, rather than spending time grinding for loot otherwise. Gan (2021) has posited that a gacha system skews the player’s ability to value even in the simplest loot-box transaction, as the player can deem the box’s contents to have ‘infinite’ value. Although the microtransaction in this case is one where the quality of the item is known to the player, it still represents an exchange of time-in-game for a superior item, eliminating the need to grind.

Even with the grind of opening hundreds of loot boxes, the same kind of relationship to loot obtains in that the player's expectations for success are uncoupled from the grind-time put in. According to Woods (2022b), these grind outcomes need to be rationalised by the player, "causing the [logic] governing playing behaviours to extend beyond the gamespace" (p. 1077). Time is always a tangible investment that needs consideration, and just as with 'real' work, Woods deems this type of activity to be 'playbour', where the game qualities of a game would seem completely nullified (2022b). Woods (2022a) has also theorised the player's *feelings* about their chances of winning also impair their ability to make rational sense of the transaction. The major problem for the looter shooter, then, is understanding how the player carves out a satisfying experience with regard to either the ludological or narratological characteristics of a typical game. The idea of playbour does not necessarily obviate play itself, but the primacy of the loot box compromises the definition of both of these dominant analytic categories with regard to these games.

The concepts of accomplishment and difficulty when applied to any kind of shooter indeed correspond to the player's affective relationship to the game experience and what they expect to achieve in or learn about the game world within that context. Without the traditional consequences of gameplay, the dynamics of unexpected reversals of fortune, and high stakes to strive *for*, the looter shooter's dramatic curve threatens to approximate the shape of a flat line. In the remainder of this article, I shall propose that the looter shooter reduces everything to grind, the sometimes-annoying counterpart to engaged, thoughtful gameplay. In order to analyse this, we need to understand how a looter shooter's combination of characteristics contorts received understandings of how shooters typically work. There is no better example than that of the foundational game series of this nascent genre, *Borderlands*.

Borderlands: The Definitive Looter Shooter and Its Characteristics

Borderlands typifies the approach and themes of the looter shooter through its mechanics, aesthetics and narrative. The player is openly welcomed by the game into a parody of heroic fantasy by means of the gestures it uses to beckon the player through its paces, often bending over backwards to allow the player to succeed. The premise of the first game in the series is that of the player being deposited on the barren planet of Pandora, its dusty ghost towns dotting the bleak landscape. The player first chooses a character from several different classes (the stealth warrior, the heavy berserker, the generic commando, the sniper) and the opening cinematic depicts a bus ride to Firestone, a town overrun by *Mad Max*-esque bandits. After being figuratively shoved off of the bus by Marcus Kincaid, the voice and face of the gun-vending franchise across Pandora, the player is greeted by the robot Claptrap. Claptrap's purpose is to lead the subsequent tutorial, and to that end, he proudly delivers to the player a wrist-interface, giving a diegetic excuse for the player's corporate-sponsored HUD overlay, which provides information about player health, shields, weapon selection, map location, and so on. The player thus takes in the cast-offs of overbuilt capitalism – the crumpled containers, the tattered plastic used-car lot pennants, the heaps of twisted metal and giant slag piles, while corporate scavengers dole out ordnance to all comers so they can find the Vault.

The backdrop of *Borderlands* is that of an ever-failing wasteful corporate enterprise engaged in extraction, with no thought to the welfare of the thousands of people stranded in the sacrifice zone. The familiar tropes of the Hollywood Western that meet the player accurately mimic the ethos of a gold rush, and this idea is developed further in *Borderlands 2* with the introduction of Eridium as a resource for the player to exploit. One side mission in *Borderlands 2*, “Minecart Mischief”, features the following monologue from the NPC archaeologist Patricia Tannis informing the player about the Dahl Corporation’s abandonment of its workers:

As it turns out, Dahl turned tail when the Crimson Lance showed up and flexed their various muscles. The central issue being that Dahl brought many workers here, including myself, and left without evacuating most of us. The bandits you fight out there used to be family men, workers, scientists.... We’re all broken because of them. (Gearbox Software, 2012a)

With corporate profligacy having left behind this world of loot, the entire apparatus for exploiting the environment through violence and wanton extraction is left open to the player. In the wake of a world harrowed by mass trauma, the game that is played within it is the opposite the scarcity found in the survival-horror genre. The endless bounty of XP and boxes of cash, ammo, and weapons just ripe for the taking are indistinguishable from the landscape and the built world that surrounds the player. Anything in the *Borderlands* universe can be a loot receptacle – dented filing cabinets, old-fashioned cash registers, cardboard boxes, ammunition racks, and even abandoned chemical toilets. The rarer loot boxes produce randomly generated level-appropriate loot for the player; even if out-of-player-class items are found, they can be exchanged at one of the many vending machines for in-game currency. Every object that can be collected by the player is exploitable for XP, cash, or different pieces of loot.

The explicit character of the looter shooter as a meta-narrative exercise in collecting loot is thus constantly before the player, and in tune with the satirical aspects of the plunder, *Borderlands* often plays up its lack of narrative heft to comic effect. The extradiegetic characteristics which call attention to the paucity of narrative in *Borderlands* are sometimes the only narrative strategies in evidence. In the *Borderlands 2* DLC *Mr. Torgue’s Campaign of Carnage* (Gearbox Software, 2012b), Mr. Torgue himself exhorts the player to embark on a mission for comically, deliberately unspecified reasons; one side mission in the base game of *Borderlands 2* has the player side mission “Shoot This Guy in the Face”, which takes a brisk three seconds to complete. Even at the start of *Borderlands 2*, the pompous NPC Sir Hammerlock recounts the terrorist reign of Hyperion, calls for the defeat of Handsome Jack, then immediately apologises to the player, “Bah–I’m spouting exposition again, aren’t I?” (Gearbox Software, 2012a).

The central issue of loot in the looter shooter calls into question the idea of possession, theft, and power, not only for the player, but for the drama of capital circulation. The detritus the game world relentlessly proffers seems to *belong* to no one, and the player’s appropriation of the bounty is without any real consequences. The distribution of treasure in D&D only tends to spur players to think about the original possessors of the treasure being plundered if there is a strong narrative component. In a sense, the primacy of loot effaces even the idea of the player’s *life* retaining any value or importance. In early digital rogue games, such as *NetHack* (NetHack DevTeam, 1987-2020), bones files contain information about previous players’ caches of loot, reposing in graves around the game world. Digging up such graves to recover the loot within usually results in cursed items, which would complicate anyone’s playthrough. By contrast, the now-defunct looter shooter *The Cycle: Frontier* explicitly urged the player to loot the corpses of previous explorers to find anything useful. The latter game’s extraction mechanic, where the player goes to a

central hub in order to take on missions to recover minerals, equipment, and other precious objects before returning to a mine a planet's surface, allowed players to reserve a special space in their backpack to save acquired loot and have it transported back to the hub in case of their inevitable, immanent, and always untimely death.

As opposed to a classic immersive sim (such as *System Shock 2* [Looking Glass Studios & Irrational Games, 1999], *Deus Ex* [Ion Storm, 2000] or the *Dishonored* [Arkane Studios, 2012-2017] series), the player is never allowed to lose themselves in the *Borderlands* world fully. The order of play is not so much adventure, but rather the management and calculation related to the work of extraction. Thus, *Borderlands* in particular effaces the heroic narrative idea of the player character being the chosen one, despite the game's diegetic reassurances. From Claptrap's engagement of the player as a minion in *Borderlands* to the grunt-level work assignment of *The Ascent*, and even the convoluted rescue mission of *Risk of Rain 2*, the single player narrative experience of the looter shooter is about engaging in some kind of *work* detail, with plentiful rewards strewn along the way. The HUD overlay in the *Borderlands* series continuously comments on the experience of the player down to the spelling out of enemy health, shields, experience level, map position, and so on, giving the player quantitatively updated expectations about the management of combat, even down to the number values of the damage dealt, as with typical roguelites. For *Borderlands*, there is something of an overall quest for loot (of course). But because the Vault is shown to be, in the end, an elaborate MacGuffin out of the reach of the player, that ultimate quest is for naught in the end.

In every possible sense, both the main questline and the numerous side quests in *Borderlands* treat the player character as very much a worker, either as a freebooting speculator or a humble hired hand. The latter point is driven home by the game's hub-location convention of hosting a job board (a physical bulletin board) for these missions. These discrete tasks, like those for *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) or the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar North et al., 1997-2021), relate back to the main mission somewhat, but only just to build XP and level up: areas and weapons that may be barred to the player thus become their own incentive for action, completing the demolition of the barrier between gameplay object and narrative. As always, the loot is the story, with the prospects of heroism often painted as a hollow joke.

Grind and the Burlesque of Capital

The struggle of *Borderlands* to present a narrative to the player would be a clue to the hidden grind at the heart of its game experience. Grind can be defined as repetitive gameplay with a goal that falls short of a winning game state, but nevertheless represents a goal achieved through work on the player's part. This could be something like digging for diamonds in *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011) in order to fabricate a suit of armour, or farming for in-game currency by fighting monsters in order to exchange the fruits of that labour for profit. Grinding represents a player's resistance to the concept that a game must always be narratively compelling in order to play it; grinding is then patently an anti-narrative conceit, and can be undertaken for a number of reasons. Game players use the word *grind* in a very casual way, talking about things getting too 'grindy', or the difference between grinding and doing something else as worthwhile gameplay. Usually, grind is undertaken to obtain something in the game that cannot be gotten otherwise through the labour of play,

then resuming meaningful play once that objective is achieved. This grind goal should be related to the object of the game, supporting the player's progress, which usually means getting an item or the means to purchase an item. One could also say that grind has nothing to do with a game strategy, but rather betrays the player's willingness to simply put in quantities of time in order to achieve a goal. As Jukić (2024) notes in his study of trophies in digital games, such a goal, ostensibly an ancillary sidelight, becomes more important than the game itself. An outside observer could look at grinding activity and not be able to distinguish it from playing a game, but nevertheless determine that it is work, which takes skill, grit, and a decided lack of strategy or tension. The sorting of loot as the ever-present challenge of *Borderlands* can be deemed an example of grind. The endless loot boxes scattered around Pandora, which do take time to rifle through, very often contain redundant weapons that the players then either liquidate or throw away. Aside from the capitalistic fetishism of in-game objects, the focus on loot forces another game mechanic on the player: that of the continual evaluation and reselling of loot. The player's work becomes separating the wheat from the chaff in an endless stream of material wealth and weapons.

The concept of disaster capitalism, a phrase made famous by Naomi Klein, lies at the root of each looter shooter's chaotic game economy. For Klein (2007), the term describes the exploitation of any place suddenly transformed by any kind of calamity, either natural or human-caused; this exploitation is carried out by the fused forces of capitalism and governmental action. For each looter shooter's world, there is always some kind of mythical cataclysm bearing the residue of a bottomless stockpile of weapons, armour, and cash. In *Borderlands*, the rush to mine Eridium and hunt for the Vault has left the planet an utter mess, with the leftover human wreckage of the invasion poking around on the surface for anything of value the corporate plunderers may have left behind. The sheer amount of ordnance is a testament to the environmental trauma of exploitation, and the player's isolation amid the collapse of the corporate enterprise (another trauma in itself) to sort through the detritus as a scavenger is the sad endgame of the disaster capitalism narrative. The ultimate consequences of calamity are always a repurposing of the fruits of overproduction. Klein (2007) remarks that as the trauma of 9/11 opened up a new market for consumer surveillance goods, and the commodification of these tools allowed them to take on a life of their own, permitting them to be used by their owners for uses other than their own personal security. David Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession" lies at the heart of the disaster capitalism phenomenon, one which cannot avoid waste on a titanic scale. Harvey (2004) notes if capital cannot be "absorbed internally," goods and labour must be sent "elsewhere" to avoid devaluation (2004, p. 66). In the end, the particular situation has to do with production gone hyperactive:

Accumulation by dispossession can occur in a variety of ways and there is much that is both contingent and haphazard about its modus operandi. Yet it is omnipresent in no matter what historical period and picks up strongly when crises of overaccumulation occur in expanded reproduction, when there seems to be no other exit except devaluation. (Harvey, 2004, p. 76)

The player of the looter shooter is thus trapped in this world of overproduction, an infinite recovery operation that can never exhaust all that treasure on the verge of complete devaluation. The player is thus the last, lone, harried arbiter of value of a broken hierarchy of goods.

When thinking about the idea of the looter shooter and what makes it distinctive, it definitely features a built world that reflects the all-consuming nature of capitalism. This world not only provides endless choice and player incentives but diminishes those incentives by requiring the player to navigate the tsunami of loot. Baudrillard (1988) writes

pointedly about the self-reinforcing cycle of capital in *The consumer society*, likening the continual oscillation of production and consumption to that of the spectacle and operation of a pinball machine. Memorably, Baudrillard elaborates on the idea of a pinball machine with its wires exposed as being like the machinations of capital; once opened, the frenzied drive to *consume* is found to have nothing at the bottom:

This ludic activity may give the appearance of being a passion. But it never is. It is consumption – in this case, abstract manipulation of lights, ‘flippers’ and electrical reaction times, in other cases, the abstract manipulation of marks of prestige in the variants of fashion. Consumption is combinatorial investment: it is exclusive of passion. (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 114)

Elsewhere in the same work, Baudrillard (1988) identifies the cycle of production and consumption as being two ends of the same Lacanian movement: “this flight from one signifier to another is merely the superficial reality of a desire which is, for its part, insatiable because it is based on lack” (p. 77). With the impulse to *consume* so much at the fore of the looter shooter, the prospect of the grind threatens to lay bare the pretence at the heart of this style of game, that the player will never be *truly* satisfied. The spectacle of consumption is rendered meaningless in real time as the game is played. Unlike the projects of building in *Minecraft*, the player of the looter shooter builds nothing, but acquires accoutrements to decorate and aid the avatar. The narrative gravity of the looter shooter is thus very different than the expected crescendo of a narrative game; with the desires of the player at the centre, the only mainspring for action is consumption.

There is *too much* of everything in the looter shooter to value properly, whether mobs, ammo, currency, or guns, and the only real narrative pull is the endlessly replayable procedural quality of it all, either in single player or cooperative mode. The player can very easily lapse into experiencing the looter shooter as a series of exercises related to inventory management, and the decisions required to undertake that can displace the more traditional ones of combat, strategy, and exploration. These distinctive characteristics of the looter shooter give a new meaning to grind, where the search for the weapons that best suit the player can often lead to side quests being the main attraction.

Conclusion

In this study, we have investigated the capability of the looter shooter to do and represent many things, particularly how its apportionment of incentives in the gamespace – money, weapons, or other prizes – distorts a typical FPS’s order of play and collapses both narratology and ludology into the same plane of immanence through the perpetual sorting of loot. Given the looter shooter’s reduction of plot to the extraction of loot, the gameworld exhibits a kind of proleptic narrative hopelessness; the anti-hero bent of the looter shooter makes it ideally suited for settings such as cyberpunk and the Western, broadcasting the utter defeatism at the heart of both of these narrative genres. Both genres also provide apt metaphors for environmental degradation and corporate malfeasance, as well as underscoring the ultimate powerlessness of the lone protagonist as they attempt to right a corrupt and broken world. The hero is not able to overcome or conquer anything; the protagonist remains very much within the economy it establishes. The looter shooter is the perfect genre for casual cooperative play, with no real narrative convolutions to interfere with its purity. In all, the principal characteristic of games such as *Borderlands* remains that of the quest for weapons and armour, bringing the RPG shooter back to its conflicted ‘hauling’ roots. In the end, the player is merely a fractious, disruptive worker, rather than

a conquering hero. Therefore, looter shooters are wildly incompatible with the concept of heroic fantasy, as in the typical sword and sorcery RPG; though loot is always a draw with the latter type of game, the looter shooter betrays the roots of the unimaginative dungeon crawl, as the simple act of looting is taken as an end in itself.

The environment of the looter shooter thus brings forth the unconscious secret of such games, that of the ultimate nothingness of loot. The conventions of loot boxes exacerbate this feature of the traditional tabletop RPG, overtly demolishing the separation between game and narrative. In *Theory of the gimmick*, Ngai (2020) notes the problem of the “gimmick” – the novelty of a material object, gesture, trick or idea – as revealing the heart of capital production itself to be “an entire system of relations based on the mismeasurement of wealth” (p. 51). The sustained invention of the looter shooter, its aleatory surprise, and possibly new, unique weapons and armour in every box is grounded in the concept of the novelty of those loot boxes rather than dramatic narrative twists. Procedural generation of all types ensures that there is something that can always keep the player engaged and countersigns the commodification of said novelty. The looter shooter is neither a narrative that is punctuated by gameplay, nor a pure, static arcade experience, but rather a vague, liminal ever-expanding space devoted to the task of resource management. With no heroic destiny, there is no dramatic tension, no hope of ‘winning’. The looter shooter thus provides the perfect example of an experience where there are no real narrative beats to be fulfilled, but rather a constant grind for rewards, which in themselves harbour fleeting value.

The looter shooter is a uniquely positioned genre of satirical digital game without peer. We have already seen how some high-profile games such as *Cyberpunk 2077* have drawn from the hyperbolic character of pure looter shooters to implement a similar kind of hyperactive in-game economy, one which can distract, obsess, and entrap the player, de-incentivizing them from completing the game’s narrative. In a sometimes caustic and dismissive way, the looter shooter reveals what similar shooter games are all about, reducing all the action to one loot box operation after another. In other words, there are no limits on the amount of treasure that one can collect; it is infinite, infinitely playable (given its roguelite repopulation dynamics) and also infinitely novel, given its tendencies toward procedural generation. The looter shooter is the epitome of capital production gone grievously wrong, inevitably burying the player under the thing the game thinks the player really wants: mountains of loot.

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