The Moral Stake of Gamification

On the ‘Black Swan: The Communes’ hackathon
at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, August 2021

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The first step toward building an alternative world has to be a refusal of the world implanted in our minds... In the culture of globalisation, as in... hell, there is no glimpse of an elsewhere or an otherwise.

John Berger, ‘Against the Great Defeat of the World’ (1999) 1

But as we move progressively along, you will have but to keep an attentive eye upon our heroes, and you’ll have no trouble discerning their characteristic peccadillos and the particular type of voluptuous mania which best suits each of them.

Marquis de Sade, The 120 Days of Sodom (1785) 2

Follow the annals of history and find that revolutions coincide with reproductions of empire. The ‘alternative world’, being the object of a revolution and its attempt at articulating ‘utopia’, is conjoined with that which has been purged from everyday life – or, in the words of Avery F Gordon, that which ‘has been exiled’. 3 However, if a revolutionary believes that their regime has transcended the past such that the monstrous is no longer extant in society, they have misapprehended evil and the flow of history – for a stream cannot rise above its source. In other words, any regime that holds itself out as the alternative without grappling with the recurrence of the world’s ‘deformed and repressed social habits’ 4 is nothing more than a vanity project at best and propaganda at worst.

‘Black Swan: The Communes’, a thirty-six-hour ‘hackathon’ which occurred at the KW Institute of Contemporary Art between 27–28 August 2021, was designed and

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4 Ibid
administered by Black Swan DAO\(^5\) – ‘an experimental digital initiative’ led by Laura Lotti, Penny Rafferty, Calum Bowden and Leïth Benkhedda, ‘designed to eat the art world by channeling resources from established institutions to cultural practitioners’. The machinations of this hackathon can be summarised as follows: Black Swan secured resources from a myriad of artworld stakeholders – in the form of residencies, specialist advice and exhibition spaces – which were divided up and given to four ‘communes’ who bartered these between one another in pursuit of the resources they wished to possess. Ultimately, the hackathon sought to provide a space where artists and cultural workers could experiment with how institutional holdings might be distributed differently, with the added benefit of being able to use the given resources for ‘real world’ projects decided upon by the communes.

Participants applied to Black Swan and KW from an open call, with those selected being sorted into one of four communes – Guild, Clan, Cult or Venture – each representing a different political paradigm that members would have to personify and perform as throughout the event. For example, members of Guild were bound to the feudal shibboleth of ‘raid, brute force and plunder’, whilst Clan was required to effectuate the lofty precept of ‘association, or rather the reciprocity of the gift, reciprocal soul theft’. If what I am describing seems reminiscent of a computer game or some MMORPG with orcs and mages, that is, perhaps, in large part the point. Live action role-play and gamification are central tenets in Penny Rafferty’s other practice as Omsk Social Club, and whose hand in forming the hackathon’s parameters was patent. Upon entering the KW arena, Rafferty asked whether I would like to continue observing the event affected by ‘The Fog’. The Fog – a psychic interruption rather than a Romantic phenomenon – is the history-annihilating event conjured into existence by the organisers to distinguish between life before and during the hackathon: a clean break with history that one was compelled to accept during their gameplay. Forced erasures of history have always felt slightly fascist, and thus I believed it wiser to remain conscious of what came before, particularly because it was proscribed for everyone else.\(^6\)

I began by observing Cult, a commune who spent the better part of an hour compiling a list of their personal skills and assets, scheming how these could be leveraged with the other teams. One player advocated for a pooling together of their social capital, given that as a group outside the hackathon, they would have an aggregate of over 50,000 Instagram followers. Their combined following could be ‘minted into a token’ (game parlance for ‘turned into chattel’) and used as currency. What struck me about this proposition was threefold: firstly, a social media exchange was tendered in spite of the fact that The Fog was supposed to have annihilated modernity (revealing how the premise of the game wears thin). Secondly, this idea was offered in total seriousness in a hackathon that – purportedly –

\(^5\) ‘Decentralised Autonomous Organisation’

\(^6\) On the importance of historical materialism, Walter Benjamin wrote ‘For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irrevocably’; see Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ [1942], in Illuminations, Hannah Arendt, ed, Harry Zohn, trans, Schocken Books, New York, 1969
expected its participants to minimise cultural gatekeeping and find more horizontal frameworks of resource distribution, tasks which (one would assume) requires a moving away from the self-aggrandising capital of social media. Thirdly, and most telling, that nobody actually relinquished their followers or personal brand for the sake of the game evinced that it was perhaps too grave or aberrant an ask. Clout must subsist in utopia.

But if Instagram being spared from an apocalypse did not appear absurd enough, Cult initiated an event for the communes in the early hours of the morning – a so-called ‘communal crying session’ – where people sat in a circle, rubbed Tiger Balm onto their eyelids and wept so as to gain cognisance on the value of emotional labour. At the end of the hackathon, Cult presented a project based on this idea: that of turning one’s tears into cryptocurrency. A glass vessel which could hold these tears before they dematerialised was presented to us like a relic, an object so decorative I struggled to find value in it as either prototype or symbol, or, indeed, at all. Fortunately, perhaps, Cult’s project to date has deviated slightly from such heavy-handed metaphors. Using their resources (a two-week residency at Callie’s, an online exhibition space provided by Light Art Space, and a liquidity grant from Spectre) they plan to build a Chatbot that ‘reverse engineers’ the formation of online identities in order to interrogate questions of psychology and strategy within environments of collective world-building and the creation of online personas’. This is, apparently, the capstone investigation of our time.

Sianne Ngai has theorised that ‘we call things gimmicks when it becomes radically uncertain if they are working too hard or too little, if they are historically backward or just as problematically advanced, if they are wonders or tricks’. Working too hard whilst working too little, projecting a veneer of progressivity without actively seeking an abolition of that which causes privation – this is the substance of Cult’s pursuits, and largely of the Black Swan hackathon itself. Venture, a commune that I watched debate the rules of the event with great vehemence, eventually worked out that devising a utopian structure within these depraved conditions was a doomed task. As the event rolled on, ‘hostages’ were taken between the communes and ‘wars’ were waged. KW became an ecosystem where meeting rooms represented sovereign states, and players found themselves as either emissaries or conquerors, parodying a world not dissimilar to that which we already have. As the poet Franny Choi wrote: ‘By the time the apocalypse began, the world had already ended. It ended every day for a century or two. It ended, and another ending world spun in its place.’

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8 In particular, Guild, after hours of fruitless negotiations, asserted title to territory over the hackathon’s common area. Moreover, they refused to participate with the other communes in good faith, going so far as designing a coat of arms that featured the fascistic motto of ‘we put art before life’. Put simply, Guild became performatively authoritarian, seeing the conditions of the hackathon as a call to barbarism. On the value of Guild’s act as an artistic gesture, I am reminded of Susan Sontag’s words in ‘Fascinating Fascism’ [1974]: ‘Fascist art glorifies surrender, it exalts mindlessness, it glamorizes death’, Susan Sontag, ‘Fascinating Fascism’, in Under the Sign of Saturn, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1980, pp 73–105
The four communes interacted with one another from a place of want and scarcity, which revealed (if unwittingly) a conceit at the heart of this event. If the institutional resources in question were already pledged to the hackathon – and by proxy, then, the participants – what is the moral status of Black Swan in separating people into tribes and making them fight for this bounty? It appeared as though the very nature of the game required the communes to consider one another enemies rather than comrades, obfuscating the fact that the greatest hurdle to an alternative world, here, was that of the game itself. The hackathon’s world-building premise was kept aloft by this contradiction, and upon realising it, Venture seized upon a Foucauldian impulse to think about how they might disempower the game from within. Weary from hours of observation yet nonetheless unaffected by The Fog, I offered a hand from history: rebel against your masters – which is to say, among other things, find ways to unionise.10

I kept hearing Black Swan repeat their *modus operandi* in theme and variation: ‘decentralise the institution’, ‘rethink gatekeeping’, and so on. These are mantras that require a willing blindness to the fact that their game is administered quite literally inside an institution, and that a player’s application and acceptance into this game-as-public-programme is, *ipsa facto*, a direct consequence of institutional gatekeeping. Surprisingly, some were more forthright about reproducing existing structures than others. In the spirit of ‘gifting’ (as was their political remit), Clan decided against trading their Kunstverein München residency resource, announcing in their end-of-hackathon presentation that they awarded it to one of their own members. After much internal discussion, they agreed she best deserved it. What distinguishes this reasoning from those of current arts juries and funding bodies is unclear, but it was refreshing that they were at least upfront about their opacity.

The artists Sanja Grozdanić and Bassem Saad recently said that ‘the future must be more than an endless accumulation of the past’.11 I would like to add that a way in which the past accumulates is by deception, a sleight of hand. Black Swan were apparently surprised that players were particularly vying for resources attached to museums and similar cultural institutions – namely for their residency spaces – but it remained wholly unsurprising to everyone else, given that such real opportunities have analogously real implications for artists in professional life beyond The Fog. They are steps to something greater, signifiers on CVs, another means of ascending the ladder. Viewed wholly, while Black Swan appeared to frame their hackathon as an exercise in workshop utopia, the game’s strictures and regulations still led people to relate to one another through differing shades of violence. The hackathon positioned abundance and pleasure (if any) as being secondary to suffering – a command to

10 Venture were somewhat successful. They managed to orchestrate and funnel a large proportion of the hackathon’s resources into a ‘new’ commune – the ‘Communes DAO’ – collapsing as many borders as they could between the teams. A noted deficiency, however, is that the final projects to be actualised here still feel difficult to defend as radically different or even progressive. Commune DAO’s projects – from the creation of a digital ‘yacht’ that hosts ‘events, exhibitions and NFT sales... comparable to a carpool’ to a ‘Decentralized Planetary Boardgame’ – the group still reproduces, in my opinion, similar types of gamification that this text critiques.

11 Sanja Grozdanić and Bassem Saad, ‘Beirut of the Balkans and the American Century’, presented on the 1–2 September 2021 at Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt
spar rather than a call to share. Perhaps the lesson learned is that any regime that seeks to mediate institutional resources through inciting competition ought to be done away with, and perhaps by the same logic, so, too, might we dissolve the institution should we organise against it rather than fight our peers for its resources. To borrow from the late Diane di Prima, a message to the workers:

...you are selling
yourself short, remember
you can have what you ask for, ask for everythi

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12 From Diane di Prima’s ‘Revolutionary Letters No 19 (for The Poor People’s Campaign)’, first published in the *Ann Arbor Sun*, 15 February 1969, see [https://aadl.org/node/192778](https://aadl.org/node/192778)