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THEMATIC SECTION

Waste Labor and the Capitalist Mythology in Total Refusal's *Hardly Working*

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ABSTRACT: This article explores *Hardly Working* (2022), a four-channel video installation by the Austrian media collective Total Refusal, which appropriates the open-world environment of Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) to critique capitalist mythology and the representation of labor. The film foregrounds non-player characters (NPCs) – a washerwoman, street-sweeper, carpenter, and stablehand – whose labor, while visually present in the game, is functionally meaningless and algorithmically repetitive. By removing the player-avatar and focusing on these peripheral figures, Total Refusal reconfigures the game's spatial and narrative hierarchies, transforming it into a site for Marxist critique.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Guy Debord and Georg Lukács, the article examines how *Hardly Working* engages themes of alienation, discipline, spectacle, myth, and class consciousness. The analysis reveals that *Red Dead II* perpetuates a frontier mythology that

RESUMO: Este artigo analisa *Hardly Working* (2022), uma instalação de vídeo de quatro canais do coletivo austríaco de media Total Refusal, que se apropria do ambiente de mundo aberto do videogame *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018), da Rockstar Games, para criticar a mitologia capitalista e a representação do trabalho. O filme coloca em primeiro plano personagens não jogáveis (NPCs) — uma lavadeira, um varredor de ruas, um carpinteiro e um tratador de cavalos — cujo trabalho, embora visualmente presente no jogo, é funcionalmente desprovido de significado e marcado pela repetição algorítmica. Ao remover o avatar do jogador e concentrar-se nestas figuras periféricas, o coletivo Total Refusal reconfigura as hierarquias espaciais e narrativas do jogo, transformando-o num espaço de crítica marxista.

Com base nos enquadramentos teóricos de Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Guy Debord e Georg Lukács, o artigo examina de que forma *Hardly Working* mobiliza temas como a alienação, a



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20 aligns with neoliberal ideals of freedom, individualism, and market inevitability, while simultaneously erasing the structures of labor that support this fantasy. By presenting NPCs as digital laborers caught in Sisyphean loops, *Hardly Working* exposes the game's ideological function: to normalize and aestheticize capitalist exploitation.

Total Refusal's work operates through remediation, transforming a commercial video game into a critical visual performance. The installation's observational style and moments of algorithmic rupture allow for a Brechtian distancing effect, encouraging spectators to question the "naturalness" of digital labor and its real-world analogs. This article situates *Hardly Working* within a broader discourse on media, power, and representation, arguing that it exemplifies how artistic interventions in digital spaces can reveal the hidden logics of capitalist systems and provoke critical reflection on labor, visibility, and consent.

KEYWORDS: Digital Labor, Capitalist Ideology, Total Refusal, Video Game Critique, Marxist Aesthetics.

disciplina, o espetáculo, o mito e a consciência de classe.

A análise revela que *Red Dead Redemption II* perpetua uma mitologia da fronteira alinhada com ideais neoliberais de liberdade, individualismo e inevitabilidade do mercado, ao mesmo tempo que apaga as estruturas laborais que sustentam essa fantasia. Ao apresentar os NPCs como trabalhadores digitais presos em ciclos sisifianos, *Hardly Working* expõe a função ideológica do jogo: normalizar e estetizar a exploração capitalista.

A obra de Total Refusal opera através da remediação, transformando um videogame comercial numa performance visual crítica. O estilo observacional da instalação e os momentos de ruptura algorítmica produzem um efeito de distanciamento brechtiano, incentivando os espectadores a questionar a "naturalidade" do trabalho digital e os seus análogos no mundo real. Este artigo insere *Hardly Working* num debate mais amplo sobre media, poder e representação, argumentando que a obra exemplifica como intervenções artísticas em espaços digitais podem revelar as lógicas ocultas dos sistemas capitalistas e suscitar uma reflexão crítica sobre trabalho, visibilidade e consentimento.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Trabalho Digital, Ideologia Capitalista, Total Refusal, Crítica dos Videogames, Estética Marxista.

Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) immerses players in a sprawling, hyperreal Wild West at the dawn of modern capitalism. The game's narrative follows Arthur Morgan of the Van der Linde gang as they struggle to survive amid the advance of state power and markets. Although *Red Dead II* has been praised for its meticulous open world and emotional storytelling, it also reproduces a long-standing frontier mythology: the idea of America as a "wide-open land of unlimited opportunity" for the rugged individual (Slotkin 1998, 5). In this mythic vision, individual freedom and social mobility are paramount, and the state exists chiefly to protect property and order. History is romanticized or ignored, and exploitative social relations appear as natural.

The Austrian media-arts collective Total Refusal intervenes in this digital fantasy with their installation *Hardly Working* (2022). This four-channel video work ethnographically observes the routines of four NPCs (non-player characters) in *Red Dead II*: a laundress, a street-sweeper, a carpenter, and a stablehand. Using game mods and cinematic techniques, Total Refusal forces the player's camera toward these background characters, revealing their unending, purposeless labor loops. In moments when the game's algorithm "glitches", these characters break from routine and display unexpected behaviors that hint at human vulnerability. As one critic notes, the film "sheds a limelight on the characters that normally remain in the background of video games" and shows how their "labor routines, activity patterns, as well as bugs and malfunctions, paint a vivid analogy for work under capitalism" (Sondhi 2024).

This article examines how *Hardly Working* uses the aesthetics of documentary, video art, and gameplay to critique capitalist ideology. The game *Red Dead II* provides a simulacrum of a capitalist "paradise" – a frontier society where freedom is offered to a lone outlaw while economic and racial exploitation are invisible.

1.1. THE FRONTIER MYTH AND THE PROMISE OF WILD WEST CAPITALISM

The American West has long been mythologized as a space of unlimited opportunity and self-fashioning. Frederick Jackson Turner's famous "frontier thesis" (1893/1920) saw the West as a "meeting point between savagery and civilization" where rugged individualism

and democracy were forged (Turner 1920, 389). In this narrative, the frontier is “romanticized and idealized”, framing westward expansion as both a natural right and an inevitable historical progression. Once the Western frontier was legally closed by the 1890 Census, its legend continued to shape national identity through novels, films, and folklore (Slotkin 1998, 5).

By the late 19th century, capitalism had fully asserted itself as the dominant social order in the Anglo-American world. As Europe became industrialized, American bourgeois interests sought new “virgin” territories and resources overseas, now largely unavailable at home. Colonization and violence against indigenous peoples accompanied this expansion. Though historians and critics have thoroughly documented these colonial and genocidal underpinnings (Wolfe 1999; Slotkin 1998), popular culture often obscures them, focusing instead on the frontier as a site of freedom and progress. As the main character in Elia Kazan’s film *The Sea of Grass* (1947) mentions: the land is soaked with natives’ blood, but he prefers to forget it. This circumstance is almost always disguised and downplayed in works of the frontier genre. However, it is precisely this circumstance that underlies the frontier mythology.

Red Dead Redemption II is set in 1899, at the tail end of the “Old West” era. The game’s narrative implicitly contrasts a disappearing wild frontier with the encroachment of an aggressive capitalist state. Structurally and visually, the game draws heavily on Western tropes – cowboys, gunslingers, lawmen, gold rushes – and on turn-of-the-century American iconography. As Robson Bello observes, *Red Dead I* and *II* are “two of the most ambitious historical representations of the American West”, and both depict the “end of the mythical ‘Old West’ through the arrival of civilizational progress” (2024, 47-51). In Rockstar’s world, players find themselves in fictionalized states like New Hanover and Ambarino, facing railroads, banks, taxes, and an encroaching national authority as the frontier closes. On the surface, this world feels immersive and “authentic”, but it is also a construction – a game designed for entertainment and profit, deeply influenced by the frontier myth.

In the game, capitalism hides behind the notions of choice and individual freedom. The protagonist, Arthur Morgan, is a criminal, yet he is assigned the role of an independent subject, able to move freely within the game’s open world. Representatives of authority appear only during minor events (e.g., to prevent a robbery from a store), and the police function as symbolic antagonists in the game: they are often unseen but carry symbolic

significance for Arthur and his gang. This model can also be explained through the lens of the state's role in classical liberalism, according to which the primary (if not sole) function of the state is the protection of private property.

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The oppressed classes are invisible in the game. Their interests are neither protected by law nor by the state. In one narrative thread, Arthur's gang frees imprisoned workers (though this gesture is not driven by any intent to fight for their rights). The game features numerous NPCs trapped in the loop of anonymous labor – and it is precisely these figures that Total Refusal focuses on.

The mythology of the frontier in *Red Dead Redemption II* is presented in synthesis with the broader American capitalist myth. The national narrative of the United States is tied to the idea of land acquisition and individual opportunity, as Hart describes: “From the beginning... land was the supreme object of appropriation” (1998, 114). Even after becoming a state, this myth persisted in the belief that anyone could succeed at any cost. This cornerstone of capitalism is clearly reflected in Victorian novels, for instance: Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849–1850), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848). Each of these works centers on an orphan or outcast who achieves success either by fate or through deceit. Such narratives reinforced the belief that success – often at the expense of others – is the natural condition and destiny of selected individuals. In short, 19th-century culture developed the idea of individual freedom while concealing and remaining silent about its dark side – the harm inflicted on others (Bradstreet 2006). At the same time, a single path to social mobility was consolidated – the miraculous one – suggesting that rising to the upper classes is only possible by fate, and that those who fail to do so simply lack divine favor. In the case of the game, God's role is played by the algorithm's predetermined logic.

2. TOTAL REFUSAL'S *HARDLY WORKING*: EXPOSING INVISIBLE LABOR

Hardly Working (2022) is a 20-minute, four-channel video installation that appropriates gameplay footage from *Red Dead Redemption II*. Filmed on location in the game world via mods and in-game cameras, the piece avoids Arthur Morgan entirely. Instead, it gives priority to four background NPCs who “normally fade into the

24 background” of the game: a laundress, a stable worker, a street-sweeper, and a carpenter (Sondhi 2024).

Hardly Working premiered at the 75th Locarno Film Festival (2022) in the Pardi di domani competition and has since been screened at major international venues, including transmediale (Berlin, 2023), the Austrian Cultural Forum (New York, 2023), and Dokfest Kassel (2022). The film received the Best Short Film Award at the Viennale and the Golden Dove at DOK Leipzig, underscoring its resonance within both art and documentary contexts. Critics have praised its hybrid form, blending machinima aesthetics with Marxist critique to expose the ideological structures of digital labor. As the Locarno Festival catalog notes, the work is “an ethnographic exploration of the work and daily life of non-player characters, the digital extras in video games. Their labor loops, activity patterns as well as bugs and malfunctions paint a vivid analogy for work under capitalism” (Locarno Film Festival 2022). This reception situates *Hardly Working* within a broader current of contemporary media practices that merge gameplay and critical observation to interrogate algorithmic capitalism.

Each NPC is captured in long, uncut takes as they repeat their everyday routines. For example, the street-sweeper endlessly cleans the same stretch of road, the laundress continuously washes clothes in a basin, and the stablehand repeatedly feeds animals. The film’s style is deliberately clinical and observational. As one reviewer notes, these characters are “observed with ethnographic precision” (Sondhi 2024), and it reminds us of Robert Flaherty’s style. In observational documentary filmmaking, reality is grasped through sustained observation – a method similarly employed by the creators of *Hardly Working*. In effect, the camera adopts the role of an anthropologist in the Wild West: it watches the digital underclass with detached curiosity, over an extended period, allowing subtle variations to emerge.

What emerges is startling. The labor these NPCs perform is utterly meaningless within the game’s economy. None of their tasks produces any useful game item; the watchful player never benefits from the street being clean or the laundry being done. Their actions are purely “surrogate”: they exist only to create the illusion of a functioning society for the sake of the player’s immersion (Arendt 1998, 42-44). The film accentuates this by showing the characters’ fruitless repetitions and by sometimes overlaying narration and music that highlight the absurdity. Notably, *Hardly Working* also seizes on the moments

when the game's algorithm breaks down. NPCs occasionally glitch: the washerwoman might freeze in place as clothes float, the stableman might walk out of the barn mid-task, the street-sweeper might turn to stare at the camera. In these glitches, the NPCs appear unexpectedly human – scratching their noses, shrugging, or looking confused. The director's voiceover comments, "when the algorithm shows inconsistencies, the NPCs break out of the logic of total normality, and appear touchingly human" (Total Refusal 2022).

By focusing on NPCs, Total Refusal inverts the usual player-centric perspective in video games. In games, players are taught to concentrate on main characters, narrative arcs, and visible points of action (bank robberies, shootouts, story missions). Meanwhile, NPC laborers are the invisible background that "provides the stage for the protagonist's activities" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009, 37). *Hardly Working* reverses this hierarchy: the four NPCs become the protagonists. The filmmakers describe this inversion as a kind of "media guerrilla" tactic. As Jason Sondhi explains, Total Refusal "self-describe [themselves] as a 'pseudo-Marxist media guerrilla focused on the artistic intervention and appropriation of mainstream video games'" (2024). In practice, their method is to intervene in the game world through software mods, curate sequences of gameplay footage, and frame it with critical narration. This approach mixes art, scholarship, and activism. In one of their earlier works (*Operation Jane Walk*, 2016), they led an urbanist tour inside a shooter game, similarly juxtaposing high theory and violent gameplay (*idem*, 70-73). *Hardly Working* continues this line of intervention, but now with Marxist theory in explicit sight.

Importantly, *Hardly Working* is not a real documentary or a manufactured cinematic scene; it is a video art installation built entirely within the game engine. The film's four-channel format means that it can be displayed in an art gallery as an environment. Viewers might walk among screens showing different NPCs, perhaps even in a loop. This remediation – representing a game within the format of art film – is critical to the argument. In remediating the game, the artists force players/viewers to attend to details normally ignored. As Bolter and Grusin describe, remediation "amplifies the message" of new media by refashioning it with older media forms (1999, 48). Here the digital video game becomes a quasi-anthropological film, and the player's interactive freedom becomes a spectator's passive viewing. This shift from game to film is itself a

26 comment on agency: the players' ability to act is removed, leaving only the scripted NPC labor as the subject.

The film's content immediately challenges the *Red Dead II* narrative. In the game's storyline, the Van der Linde gang presents itself (at least rhetorically) as fighting for freedom and equality. But *Hardly Working* reveals that in the game's world, ordinary folk do not share that freedom. Instead, they are trapped in repetitive toil for no purpose. We will argue that this shift of focus is laden with theoretical meaning. The four characters in *Hardly Working* become symbols of Marx's proletariat – alienated laborers who produce nothing for themselves and are invisible to the “owner” of production. Their ceaseless, pointless work is a tableau of capitalist exploitation taken to the extreme: *Red Dead II*'s Wild West may promise individual freedom for its heroes, but in reality, it depends on the limitless, unpaid labor of background extras. In the following sections, we unpack this claim through Marxist and cultural theory.

2.1. ALIENATION AND THE FETISHISM OF NPC LABOR

A central insight of Karl Marx's critique of capitalism is that it fundamentally alienates labor and obscures social relations. In his analysis of commodities, Marx famously shows how the labor of private individuals becomes a social force divorced from them. In capitalism, the products of workers' labor acquire a quasi-mystical existence. “The social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour”, Marx writes, so that social relations between people take the form of relations between things (Marx 1990, ch. 1). In other words, the connections binding producer and society are hidden behind the commodity.

In *Red Dead II*, an NPC like the carpenter embodies this alienation. He repeatedly hammers wood, but the game's world never sees a finished chair or building. His labor is “simply a loop” enforced by code, as the filmmakers note: it “neither results in a product, nor does it change anything about [his] status quo” (Total Refusal 2022). He embodies Marx's idea of the “commodification” of labor – he expends human effort, yet gains neither consciousness of himself as an individual with agency, nor ownership of what he produces. Instead, his labor has been abstracted into routine for the sake of gameworld

ambience. The fruit of his work is invisible: the wood he moves does not lead to visible change, and his own body remains fixed in place as if grafted to his machine of labor. 27

Marx also emphasizes that commodities are not just useful things, but also fetish objects. Fetishism means that social relations and power appear as properties of commodities rather than of people. In *Hardly Working*, the NPCs' repetitive actions have become fetishized. The game's engine uses them to "congeal" the social landscape. For example, the game might use the street-sweeper's routine to animate the town, but not allow the player to experience any effect from it. The product of his labor – a clean street – is no more real than the particles of dust he sweeps, and both vanish from representation as soon as the loop resets. Thus, his actions become a kind of abstract "texture" of the world, a fetishist background detail. The player never engages with his labor as labor; it remains a signifier with no signified, creating only the appearance of a functioning society. This mirrors Marx's observation that the commodity "stands on its head" and seems to act on its own (Marx 1990, ch. 1). The NPC's work has become a fetishism: it is a complementary element of city life, but it masks the real goals of the game's creators, who are, willingly or unwillingly, engaged in the remediation of the capitalist system.

Viewed through this lens, Total Refusal's film is demystifying. By zooming in on what is normally backgrounded, *Hardly Working* makes the fetish visible. The camera focuses on the NPCs' empty gestures – nearly the only product of their labor – and the voiceover explicitly draws the analogy: these characters are "digital Sisyphus machines" with "no perspective of breaking out of their activity loops" (Total Refusal 2022). In a sense, the film attempts to decode the "social hieroglyph" of the gameworld. As Marx argues, understanding capitalist society requires reading the commodity form like a cryptic script. *Hardly Working* can be seen as performing that reading: it takes what appeared to be normal "background scenery" and reveals it as a commentary on production and exploitation. In doing so, it invites players (and viewers) to perceive the NPCs not as innocuous scenery, but as laboring individuals – albeit ones separated from the products of their labor.

This theme resonates with the Victorian context sketched earlier. *Red Dead* //takes place when capitalism's logic has reached the Western frontier. Its world is a "capitalist paradise" for some: Arthur Morgan and his gang enjoy the freedom to seize

28 railroads and banks, while the state is portrayed as a minimal force. But *Hardly Working* shows that this paradise has its proletariat. By aligning game NPCs with Dickensian or Brontëan characters who toil in obscurity, the film suggests a continuity: from Victorian factory workers to Western homesteaders, capitalism's myth of mobility is built on the unseen backs of laborers. Marlow, Marx, and Lukács would all recognize these NPCs as signs of exploitation disguised by ideology.

2.2. THE SPECTACLE OF THE FRONTIER

Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle is a useful lens for understanding the role of images and narrative in *Red Dead II* and in *Hardly Working*. Debord famously declares, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images" (Debord 1983, §4). In a capitalist society, according to Debord, all lived experience is "sacred only insofar as it is representation" (Debord 1983, §1). The frontier world of *Red Dead II* is itself a spectacle: it is an object of consumption whose images unify the player's gaze. The game's vast landscapes, cinematic cutscenes, and iconic motifs (cowboy hats, saloons, Mount Rushmore) constitute a coherent "Weltanschauung" – an objectified ideology (*idem*, §5-6). Players come to experience the West through its simulation, just as mass society consumes film, TV, and adverts.

In the spectacle, the underlying relations of production are hidden behind images. *Red Dead II* provides an expansive, meticulously realized world, but it is "the autonomous movement of the non-living" (*idem*, §3) insofar as nothing in it lives beyond code. The NPCs are part of the spectacle precisely because they serve to reinforce the image of normality. Their work ensures that horses graze, townsfolk exist, and civilization seems self-perpetuating. But when Total Refusal's film detaches the camera from the main narrative and focuses on these characters, it disrupts the spectacle. It shows that the "stream of representation" is not seamless: glitches intervene, humanization emerges, and the artifice is revealed. In Debord's terms, *Hardly Working* briefly breaks the picture into pieces, exposing the separation between lived life and its representation.

Moreover, Debord argues that the spectacle "is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production" (*idem*, §6). That choice, in *Red Dead II*, is to frame

history through a particular ideological lens. The game takes a stance on capitalism: it is ambiguous, but it largely valorizes the outlaw as hero against an oppressive state. By contrast, the spectacle conceals the true current: the guerrilla gaze of *Hardly Working* asserts that capitalist power is flowing and self-affirming beneath the surface. The background labor of NPCs is “the permanent presence of [the spectacle’s] justification” (Debord 1983, §6) – an unnoticed affirmation that this world’s order is the only one possible. By making this presence visible, the film undermines the spectacle’s naturalness.

In practical terms, the remediation from game to four-channel video breaks the “ordinary” way the player interacts with the game. A player cannot normally focus on an NPC for ten minutes straight; the game either reassigns that NPC’s path or simply resets the player’s mission. In the film, the spectators are forced to sit and watch. This creates a Brechtian rupture: the viewers become estranged from the game’s storytelling. Rather than being absorbed in action or dialog, one becomes hyper-aware of the mechanics. Debord would say that the spectator is momentarily freed from the false unity of the spectacle and can see it as the constructed totality it is.

3. THE CONCEPT OF SLAVERY FROM CLASSICAL GREECE TO VIDEO GAMES

Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* provides another way to interpret the NPCs’ routines. Arendt distinguishes between three fundamental modes of human activity: labor, work, and action. Labor is the process of sustaining life – it corresponds to the necessities of the “animal laborans”. It is cyclical and never completed: one must continually eat, wash, and maintain one’s survival. Work (*homo faber*) produces a durable artifice or “world” – it is oriented toward building a human environment (e.g. houses, tools, artworks). Action is political life in the public sphere, involving speech and plurality. Crucially, Arendt argues that modern mass society has elevated labor at the expense of action. People come to view everything primarily as ways of living, subsisting, and consuming (Arendt 1998, 474-75).

The four NPCs in *Hardly Working* epitomize labor stripped of any work or action. Their activities have no meaningful end product – they are chores performed for their own sake, infinite and circular. This is precisely what Arendt identifies as the condition of

the animal laborans: “the ultimate source of all work” being subsistence itself (*idem*, 248). In the film, we see each character caught in a loop akin to Sisyphus: the washerwoman washes endlessly but never dries; the street-sweeper never reaches the town’s end. Their labors produce nothing durable or novel. In Arendt’s terms, they lack the creative dimension of *homo faber*. There is no enduring “world” left behind by their toil.

Arendt also observes that when labor becomes the sole focus of society, humans risk being treated as beasts of burden. She cites Aristotle: the ancients saw slaves as mere instruments. In *The Human Condition*, she writes that in modernity the activity of “bare maintenance” expands into the public sphere, and people become accustomed to regarding others as means to an end (1998, 241). Total Refusal explicitly invokes Arendt’s terminology: the NPCs are likened to “animal laborans”. They are shown not as individuals, but as biological engines moving according to algorithmic necessity. The film’s narration even echoes Arendt’s language: these are “surrogate actions that generate no social benefit” (Sondhi 2024). This phrase could only have come from reading Arendt. Indeed, the website accompanying *Hardly Working* says: “In light of Hannah Arendt’s description of ‘animal laborans’ ... the NPCs as individuum are an exaggeration as their work performance actually manifests their status” (Total Refusal 2022). By highlighting how useless these actions are – literally, they sustain nothing and even serve no one in the game – the film underscores Arendt’s point that such labor, when isolated from politics and creation, dehumanizes its performers.

Arendt’s concept of a “waste economy” also seems relevant. In a key passage, she describes how modern society channels the life process itself into the public realm, resulting in “tremendous contempt” for mere biological life (1998, 444). The economy becomes an endless cycle of consumption and disposal. In *Hardly Working*, the NPCs’ work is wasteful: clothes are washed but never needed; streets are swept only to be dirtied again; buildings are maintained but never progressed. One might almost see each frame as a literal tableau of Arendt’s warning: “the things appear and vanish, never to last long enough to surround the life process in their midst” (Arendt 1998, 452). Though the film does not quote Arendt verbatim, it visually embodies her analysis. Each scene looks like a “life process” kept busy yet accomplishing nothing, the quintessential condition of animal laborans. The NPCs do not even consume the products of their labor; they simply enact it.

By framing the NPCs this way, *Hardly Working* not only illustrates Arendt's distinctions but also critiques the game's narrative promise. If *Red Dead II* claims to give the player freedom and agency (action and work), the NPCs have none – their only activity is labor. In *Red Dead* mythology, outlaws assert their humanity against an exploitative world; in *Hardly Working*, we see the exploited hidden figures whose “human value” is measured only by their ability to sustain the system (Arendt 1998, 468-69). In this sense, the film dramatizes the idea that in a capitalist society turned upside-down, one's humanity is recognized only insofar as one works to sustain others.

As Tiziana Terranova (2000, 33-58) and Julian Kücklich (2005) note, digital entertainment often depends on invisible “free labor” and “playbour”, where user engagement is simultaneously a form of production. *Hardly Working* extends this critique to the algorithmic workers inside the game world, literalizing the fusion of play and labor that underpins platform capitalism. Similarly, Patrick Jagoda suggests that experimental games can reveal the contradictions of neoliberal economies – a role *Total Refusal* assumes through machinima practice (2020, 6). This reading complements recent discussions in game studies that explore labor and agency within digital environments (Bogost 2007, 1-65). Games often simulate productive work as play, masking exploitative structures through interactivity – a phenomenon *Hardly Working* critically dismantles.

3.1. ALGORITHMIC DISCIPLINE

Michel Foucault's studies of power and discipline offer another perspective on the NPCs. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault analyzes how modern institutions (prisons, factories, schools) produce “docile bodies” through constant surveillance and regulation (1995, 135-61). For Foucault, power operates less by overt coercion and more through the subtle organization of space, time, and routines. The goal is to make individuals effective and obedient, to “fold the body, to correct gestures and behaviors” in detailed ways (*idem*, 138). Power is exercised through norms and procedures that shape action at every moment.

In *Red Dead II*, the enforcement of routine is done digitally. The game's software algorithm acts as the disciplining force for the NPCs. They have no will of their own; every

32 motion is scripted, triggered by invisible parameters. This is very much like Foucault's panopticon: the NPC is always potentially observed by the algorithm (or by the player), so they internalize a habit and repeat it without question. The moment an NPC deviates (for example, due to a glitch), the code often snaps back into place or even "punishes" the NPC by resetting it. In *Hardly Working*, such a moment might show the NPC stumble or look around, only to be quickly snapped back to routine. These glitches are akin to alarms signaling a breach in discipline.

We can say that *Red Dead II* instantiates what Foucault might call a "political anatomy of detail" (1995, 140). Each NPC's body is minutely controlled: patterns are repetitive, timing is exact. They obey their loops as if in a prison or factory regime. Even though the NPCs are not humans, the film invites us to see them as human proxies in a ritual of power. When the stablehand reaches under the bench and scratches himself (as seen in the *Hardly Working* trailer), it is striking because such a small personal action is normally withheld under the game's discipline. The fact that he does it when the system falters makes that moment "human" – it reveals that the body has needs outside the planned program. Foucault notes that discipline manufactures bodies ready to "both obey and produce" (*idem*, 137). The NPCs both produce the ambience of civilization and obey the algorithm absolutely. The film frames them like laboring prisoners.

This perspective also highlights the role of the police and state in *Red Dead II*. In the game, sheriffs and Pinkerton agents serve as the human enforcers, analogous to how factories have foremen or prisons have warders. But the NPCs never interact with these figures; they are effectively "total normality." In one scene in *Hardly Working*, two NPCs stand motionless next to each other with no interaction: "A relation of relationlessness. They form no such thing as a community", notes the film's narrator (Total Refusal, *Hardly Working* 2022, 00:15:52). This image suggests how, even among the laborers, there is complete surveillance and isolation: each is alone in her loop. This mirrors Foucault's point that discipline fractures solidarity by making each person responsible for self-regulating. In the virtual world, each NPC is simultaneously self-monitoring and monitored by the invisible code.

Finally, Foucault's insight into modern power extends to the digital environment. The software and hardware of *Red Dead II* function as a panoptical machine. The NPCs are subsumed under the game's logic. This is a microcosm of what some theorists call

“algorithmic governmentality” in contemporary capitalism. If Foucault studied 18th-century prisons and factories, Total Refusal’s film suggests we now have 21st-century algorithms controlling lifeless laborers. By anthropomorphizing the NPCs when they glitch, *Hardly Working* also gently humanizes them as potential subjects of resistance. In one shot, an NPC breaks out of the routine. This is like a body escaping discipline, however fleetingly. The film thus borrows from Foucault the idea that power is exercised on bodies through norms – and that resistance might be as simple as a skipped step or an unexpected gesture.

3.2. SIGNS, MYTH, AND IDEOLOGY

The semiotic dimension of *Hardly Working* can be approached through Roland Barthes’s theory of myth and advertisement (1972). Barthes showed that what appear to be transparent or neutral images (e.g. advertisements, photographs, magazine covers) often carry ideological messages beneath their surface. In mythic form, specific historical content is presented as “natural”. For instance, a milk advertisement might not only sell milk but also subtly “transmit an idea of the natural order” in which farmer, cow, and family have fixed roles (Barthes 1972, 42).

In *Red Dead II*, the entire graphic design is a form of mythmaking. Every poster and symbol in the game suggests that the frontier world is wholesome or heroic. For example, store signs, wanted posters, and the iconic image of the white-outlined bandit all contribute to a seamless “Western” aesthetic. Total Refusal’s approach is akin to a Barthesian analysis of such visual culture. By isolating a background character and her immediate setting, the film forces us to read the details. The color of her clothes, the dirty street, the tool in her hand – these visual signs gain new weight. In one freeze-frame, the laundress’s apron with a quaint pattern is seen next to the river’s grime; together, they silently narrate class and gender roles (Milestone & Meyer 2012, 164).

A Barthesian might note that the laundress’s work, though invisible in narrative, is presented by the game’s art as charming “domesticity”. This image, once isolated, reveals how the game naturalizes a social order: clean clothes magically appear for the family to wear, maintained by unnamed others. The film’s focus on the clothes being washed shows

34 the ideological subtext: the labour of care is rendered invisible. Through sustained observation, *Hardly Working* demystifies this “magic”. It unpacks the ads of the gameworld (for there are many posters of horses, guns, and so on in the backgrounds) to show who serves and who benefits.

More broadly, Barthes argues that bourgeois culture erects its ideology at the level of detail (1972, 128). In *Hardly Working*, every detail – the color of paint the carpenter holds, the broken lantern the sewer sweeps under – might be read as a trace of ideological meaning. The installation, by amplifying background visuals, reminds us how capitalist ideology circulates through everyday cultural forms that shape understandings of social behavior, gender roles, class hierarchy, morality, and belief. For Barthes, mythic images enact a kind of silent propaganda. In the case of *Red Dead II*, those images make the frontier seem familiar and “natural”, smoothing over its violence and exploitation. *Hardly Working* interrupts the smooth narrative: the street-sweeper’s broom becomes not just a tool in an ad but a symbol of unseen toil. The film forces the spectator to confront those ideological layers.

By applying semiotics, the analysis links back to Debord: images mediate relations. The difference is that Barthes teaches us to decode those images. In *Hardly Working*, the images of labor are presented without the player’s usual context or justification. They stand naked before us. In a way, the collective voiceover performs a Barthesian decoding, pointing out the absurdity of each scene. The spectacle’s gloss is stripped off, revealing “ideological signification” (Barthes 1972). For instance, we might notice that the street-sweeper is male and dressed modestly, while the washerwoman is female and in rags – silent signs about gendered labor divisions. The film, like a Barthes essay, insists these are constructed signs, not natural givens.

3.3. CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND MANUFACTURED CONSENT

Finally, we consider how *Hardly Working* fits into the formation (or interruption) of class consciousness. Georg Lukács argued that under capitalism people perceive the world through distorted lenses of ideology (Lukács 1971). The proletariat, he claimed, is atomized and only by developing class consciousness – the recognition that “the capitalist

class in its entirety is his enemy” – can a worker see beyond the “false consciousness” of everyday life (*idem*, 89). In *Red Dead II*, the player’s perspective is at first Arthur’s: an outlaw with dreams of freedom. The experiences of generic workers are invisible, so the player can ignore the collective interests of that class.

Hardly Working serves as an anti-ideological intervention. By showing the NPCs’ grinding routines, the film invites identification with them. The spectator might start to see these characters not as mere background but as fellow humans – indeed, as human laborers. This awareness is a first step towards Lukácsian class consciousness: noticing one’s own exploitation (or that of others) and recognizing that the order of things serves a ruling class. The NPCs have no line of sight to each other or to the gang; they do not know Arthur’s name. In Lukács’s terms, they are “false selves”, objects of consumption for the player (Lukács 1971). *Hardly Working* tries to shatter that illusion by making each NPC an individual focus. The institutional “false apperception” is suspended.

In broader media-theoretical terms, this relates to Chomsky and Herman’s critique of the media. They argued that mass media serve to “manufacture consent” for the existing system, normalizing capitalism as natural and inevitable (Herman & Chomsky 1988, 1-17). *Red Dead II*, as a blockbuster cultural product, arguably participates in such a process. It normalizes frontier violence as entertainment and implicitly endorses some capitalist tropes (even while critiquing others). The world’s inequities are justified as historical progress. In Chomskyan terms, the video game “frames” its narrative so that players internalize a certain worldview without question.

Total Refusal’s work can be seen as an attempt to counter this. By remixing a commercial game into an art piece, they operate as a dissident media force. The film highlights the “plausible deniability” of the ruling class within the game: the bosses (railroads, banks) remain in the background, unseen, while the exploitation is laid bare. As Lukács would say, they are helping “the class become visible as a class-for-itself” (1971, 69-70). There is a direct analogy drawn in the draft text (though unattributed) between the NPCs’ exploitation and “manufacturing of consent”. This analogy reflects the idea that normal, everyday people can be lulled into obedience by spectacle. Here, the video game – a leisure product – becomes a site of consent formation, and *Hardly Working* calls that bluff.

Thus, *Hardly Working* can be interpreted as a piece of ideological work itself: it endeavors to awaken a critical perspective. It implies that any user of *Red Dead II* (or any mainstream game) might be living under a “capitalist myth” without realizing it. By breaking the frame, it urges media consumers to question who really profits from their fantasies. In Lukácsian spirit, Total Refusal reminds us that to “see the world as it really is”, one often needs a mirror held up (Lukács 1971). This film is such a mirror for players of a wild-west fantasy.

4. CONCLUSION

Aristotle once justified slavery by treating some humans as natural tools; such views prevailed until Marxism showed them to be barbaric fiction. Yet as the world entered the 21st century, forms of servile labor have not disappeared – they have reappeared in new guises. The oligarchs and elites no longer rely only on ancient doctrines; they now shape our beliefs through media and culture. As Noam Chomsky warns, modern power is frequently maintained by the subtle “manufacturing of consent” – by making the existing order seem normal through images and narratives (Herman & Chomsky 1988, 1-17). In this context, video games have become among the most influential cultural forms, especially for younger generations. They frame history, myth, and social relations in ways that seem real to the player. For many players, *Red Dead Redemption II* is not a history book, but it is a highly convincing world. It tells a story about capitalism: that it brings individual freedom, rugged justice, and frontier adventure.

Total Refusal’s *Hardly Working* intervenes in this story, insisting that the “freedom” of Arthur Morgan is parasitic on a hidden system of exploitation. The film’s shining of light on NPCs does more than critique a single game; it stands in for a broader critique of our society’s background laborers – the invisible, the precariat, the “essential workers” whose toil is so often taken for granted. By aligning NPCs with Arendt’s animal laborans and Marx’s proletariat, *Hardly Working* imagines a Western where the hero is, paradoxically, the washerwoman or the sweeper.

In doing so, the film performs an act of defetishization. It uses the tools of visual art to peel back capitalist ideology. The spectatorship becomes an act of learning:

witnessing these hidden cycles prompts the viewer to question what they took for granted. This aligns with what cultural theorists call the fostering of class consciousness. If Lukács called for a revolution of awareness, *Hardly Working* is a small revolution of the gaze. It says: look at who really has to work so that the world can appear to run smoothly.

Ultimately, *Hardly Working* reveals the persistence of the frontier myth even in virtual form: the myth promises a neutral, open space of freedom, but in practice this is a matter of who is visible and who is backgrounded. In the game, the player is “the hero”, the free agent. In the art piece, we are confronted with those who lack freedom, repeating banal tasks under algorithmic surveillance. This inversion exposes the capitalist story as constructed: the righteousness of individual outlaws becomes comic or tragic when set against the endless line of background laborers. The work invites us to see beyond the mythic narrative to the material (even digital) conditions that sustain it.

Hardly Working thus exemplifies how media-art can participate in critical visual culture. It merges video game and film analysis, Marxist critique and aesthetic experience. In a world where digital media increasingly shape our perception of reality, the film stands as a reminder that what we see is often a thin layer of spectacle. Beneath it lie power and labor. As Debord teaches, the spectacle “is the heart of the unrealism of the real society” (Debord 1983, §6). By turning our attention to the society behind the spectacle, Total Refusal offers a model for critical engagement: the informed viewer does not passively accept the Western frontier as given, but interrogates it.

The title *Hardly Working* encapsulates layered irony. On one level, it evokes the colloquial phrase suggesting leisure or idleness – “hardly working” rather than “working hard”. Yet the film’s subjects, endlessly repeating futile labor, are simultaneously “hardly working” and condemned to perpetual work. The phrase thus condenses the contradiction at the heart of capitalist ideology: that even non-productive or invisible labor is essential to the appearance of productivity. In this sense, the title performs the same ideological inversion that the film critiques.

In conclusion, the Austrian collective’s intervention shows that even blockbuster games are not beyond critique. By patiently watching a virtual sweeper sweep a street for twenty minutes, we are forced to reckon with the mundanity of work and the way our culture invisibly venerates it. The film’s method – close observation, theoretical framing, and an insistence on the humanity of “programmable” characters – suggests that resistance

38 to ideology can begin simply by looking. The NPCs of *Red Dead Redemption II* may be digital, but their plight is real in its symbolism. They carry out the waste labor of a capitalist mythology, and *Hardly Working* grants them a moment of visibility. In that moment, the myth falters: the frontier, we see, was never as free as we were told.

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