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your way out of the time delay by spending it. You can publish feed stories about clicking your cow...Cow Clicker is Facebook games distilled to their essence'.¹ The games that *Cow Clicker* 'distilled' are, primarily, those made by social game developer Zynga, whose most popular titles include ChefVille, CityVille, CastleVille, FishVille, YoVille, Café World, and the aforementioned FarmVille. Eighty percent of Zynga's revenue is reported to come from in-game payments, usually for more clicks, by Facebook users. FarmVille is its most popular game and it allows users to tend to a plot of farmland with click-based game-play. It was launched on Facebook in June 2009, and reached 10 million daily active users within six weeks. By January 2013, its sequel had a reported 8.1 million daily active users and 43.5 million monthly active users.²

Players begin with a simple farm, which they are given the opportunity to personalize and expand. They are allowed to plant virtual crops that can be harvested. The technology journalist Doug Gross explains that there is 'no way to "win"', instead 'players take satisfaction in building big, fancy farms that they can showcase to their friends.'³ To cater to this demand FarmVille offers a range of desirable commodities (namely, cute farmyard animals) that can be purchased with more clicks. The 'click' is the most significant commodity in FarmVille's economy. Players are assigned a limited number, but can buy more. An article in TechCrunch magazine reported that as of February 2013, FarmVille (which is initially free to play) had generated over \$1 billion dollars through such in-game purchases.⁴ By creating consumer desire for the ability to click, Zynga established a wildly successful business model. Brian Reynolds, Zynga's chief game designer, outlines the approach in simple terms:

1 Ian Bogost, 'Cow Clicker: The making of Obsession', Ian Bogost [personal website], July 2010, accessed March 2, 2013, http://bogost.com/blog/cow_clicker_1.

2 See Mike Thompson, 'The Top 25 Facebook games of January 2013', Inside Social Games, January 2013, accessed August 1, 2013, <http://www.insidesocialgames.com/2013/01/01/the-top-25-facebook-games-of-january-2013/>.

3 Doug Gross, 'The Facebook games that millions love (and hate)', CNN News, February 2010, accessed August 2, 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/TECH/02/23/facebook.games/?hpt=Sbin>.

4 See Anthony Ha, 'Zynga's Pincus Says FarmVille Has Passed \$1B In Total Player Purchases', TechCrunch, February 2013, accessed August 1, 2013, <http://techcrunch.com/2013/02/05/farmville-1-billion/>.

'We'll give you, whatever, 50 clicks today, and tomorrow you can have 50 more...[b]ut if you want 100 clicks today, we'll sell you more clicks.'⁵

This coerced form of pleasure has led to numerous comparisons between online social games and the 'Skinner Box' (otherwise known as an Operant Conditioning Chamber). This was a cage developed in the 1930s by the behavioral psychologist Burrhus Frederic Skinner that illustrated the manipulation of behavior through simple stimulus and reward mechanisms. The 'Skinner Box' revealed that a rat would become ensnared in an open cage fitted with a lever, which it could hit in order to receive a jolt of reinforcement – i.e. a food pellet. Skinner's test went on to show that the rat became conditioned by this process and continued to remain in the cage even when the reinforcement stopped. For critic Nick Yee, this manipulation typically now takes place in online role-playing games, in which clicking is a predominant part of the game-play. Yee suggests that people on these games begin to 'feel achievement through continuous mouse-clicking', despite there being no reward or substantive incentive.⁶ From this perspective, we might argue that the users of FarmVille become ensnared like rats in an open cage. The 'alienation effects' employed in Bogost's game function to make this Skinner's Box analogy clear. The game restricts interaction to merely clicking on a cow thereby foregrounding the prescriptive and monotonous labour required to play a game like FarmVille. Furthermore, as in FarmVille, *Cow Clicker* allowed players to purchase in-game currency that could be used to buy more cows and more clicks. When a player clicked a cow, their profile would announce 'I'm clicking a cow' on the Facebook newsfeed: advertising the application and instigating competition in other gamers. 'As a play experience', Bogost explains

⁵ Brian Reynolds quoted in Jason Tanz, 'The Curse of Cow Clicker: How a Cheeky Satire Became a Videogame Hit', *Wired*, December 20, 2011, accessed March 2, 2013, http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/12/ff_cowclicker/all/.

⁶ Nick Yee compares the MMORPG *Everquest* to a Skinner's Box in an article titled 'The Virtual Skinner Box'. He suggests that particular forms of online games condition their players into perpetuating specific operations: 'Once the rat learns that pressing the lever is rewarded, a food pellet does not need to be dropped every time and the rat will still continue pressing the lever. It is in the same way that *EverQuest* shapes players to pursue more and more elaborate blacksmithing or tailoring combinations.' See Nick Yee, 'The Virtual Skinner Box', Adriane – Understanding MMORPG Addiction, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.nickyee.com/eqt/skinner.html>.

in an article in *Wired* magazine, ‘it[s]...nothing more than a collection of cheap ruses, blatantly designed to get players to keep coming back, exploit their friends, and part with their money’.⁷ He continues to make clear that he ‘didn’t set out to make it fun...Players were supposed to recognize that clicking a cow is a ridiculous thing to want to do’.⁸ So, by glibly drawing attention to the phrase ‘cash-cow’, Bogost’s application was intended to present the online social game for what it really is: simply, an industry that offers no challenge, no effort, and no gain for the player.⁹

In this respect *Cow Clicker* set out to reveal that our seemingly insignificant clicks have a material exchange value: that they are a source of value and thus constitute a form of labor, which is exploited by online service providers like Zynga. To help illustrate the laborious aspect of click-based gaming, Bogost implemented absurd restrictions on *Cow Clicker*’s game-play. A player was allowed only one click every six hours, and in-game rewards required excessive dedication: for instance, a player would receive a ‘golden cowbell’ after reaching 100,000 clicks. Despite these limitations and the simple fact that the game was designed to create dissatisfaction rather than pleasure, it became hugely popular. It even maintained its popularity after Bogost announced the ‘Cowpocalypse’. This was an attempt, ultimately in vain, to kill interest in the social game. Bogost removed all the cows and left only patches of grass. Post-‘Cowpocalypse’ players could only click on blades of grass, and 100,000,000 clicks would be rewarded with a ‘diamond cowbell’. The fact that players continued to play, despite the overwhelmingly dissatisfying experience and meager set of rewards on offer, exposed a strange and unexpected outcome of

7 Ian Bogost quoted in Tanz, ‘The Curse of Cow Clicker’.

8 Bogost quoted in Tanz, ‘The Curse of Cow Clicker’.

9 Bogost details four aspects of this type of online social gaming that he finds to be problematic on his website. They are listed, as follows: ‘Enframing’ - a reference to Martin Heidegger’s use of the term in ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ (1954). For Bogost’s purpose enframing refers to the abstraction of ‘friends’ within social games; i.e. that ‘friends’ are treated as resources, both for the player and for the game developer, who relies on word-of-mouth advertising among friends to replicate the system and get more users. ‘Compulsion’ - this refers to the Skinner Box analogy, compelling players to stay in the proverbial cage. ‘Optionalism’ - Bogost suggests that social games applications are divorced from any sense of challenge or effort, and therefore represent ‘actuations of operations on expired timers...social games’, he argues, ‘are games you don’t have to play’. ‘Destroyed Time’ - this point is self-evident. See Bogost, ‘Cow Clicker’.

Bogost's game. It revealed a form of radically empty consumption and radically empty pleasure, indicated by our repetitive clicking on a schematic representation of grass, which looks like a plain green rectangle. This is perhaps symptomatic of Maurizia Boscagli's diagnosis of contemporary mass culture in her book *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (2014). Boscagli writes that 'we are finally consuming the unconsumable...the very meaninglessness of life, and the impossibility of finding satisfaction in the commodity...now we consume both their immateriality and our recognition of their ineffectuality as commodity fetishes'.¹⁰ And, as in *Cow Clicker* (particularly after the Cowpocalypse), we 'consume the acknowledgment that we see through them'.¹¹

Bogost did not anticipate this new form of empty consumer pleasure. His critique was not experienced as critique, but as just another game. Ironically, Bogost himself also became ensnared in the social game environment that he had created. He admits taking pleasure in designing new cows for people to buy. It is as if he couldn't help but willingly participate in the machine of repetitive, meaningless and empty consumption that he had knowingly established as such. 'I was spending more time on it than I was comfortable with', Bogost admits. 'But I was compelled to do it. I couldn't stop'.¹² We might suggest, then, that *Cow Clicker's* critical game was ultimately no different from FarmVille, or anything that Zynga has produced. In support of this, we can look to a strangely unironic review of the game on a gaming aggregation website, which praises *Cow Clicker* as:

10 Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 243.

11 Boscagli, *Stuff Theory*, 243.

12 Jason Tanz details Bogost's personal obsession with the game in his *Wired* article. Tanz writes: 'Bogost kept his players hooked by introducing new cows for them to purchase using virtual mooney or real money. They ranged from the crowd-pleasingly topical (a cow covered in oil and sporting a BP-esque logo on its rump) to the aggressively cynical (the Stargrazer Cow, which was just the original cow facing the opposite direction and for which Bogost charged 2,500 mooney). They may have looked simple, but they were time-consuming to conceive and draw. By the end of the year, Bogost was devoting as much as 10 hours a week to Cow Clicker. Drawings of cows cluttered his house and office'. See Tanz, 'The Curse of Cow Clicker'.

a wonderful and addictive Incremental Clicking/Tapping video game...It allows you to buy a Cow and keep on clicking it to earn money that will help you buy more cows and upgrades. You keep on clicking on the cows to earn more clicks, use them to buy upgrades or send them to your friends and enjoy playing this brilliant time killing game. *Cow Clicker* is a great source of entertainment for all those who want to spend time clicking and clicking and clicking. If you love playing Idle clicking video games, you should definitely check it out. With all the wonderful visuals, involving and addictive game-play and easy touch, tilt and click controls, Cow Clicker offers plain clicking and tapping fun.¹³

In order to understand how Facebook digested the purportedly oppositional *Cow Clicker* platform, dissolving its critical intention and rendering it the same as everything else, we can look at Facebook's EdgeRank system. This is a tool, or algorithm, by which Facebook structures its content. EdgeRank arranges all objects existing in each user's network of relations (friends, liked products, associated groups, and general activity) and orders them on the user's 'Newsfeed'. Objects are ranked according to their 'edge'. This refers to the amount of interaction that the object has been subject to. More interaction means a stronger 'edge' and a more prominent position on a Newsfeed.¹⁴ EdgeRank shows how Facebook orders, restricts and frames user generated content. It gives information a statistical value that is wholly indifferent to Bogost's critical intention. Therefore, whilst the *Cow Clicker* project went 'viral', it did so, we can suggest, only according to the rules of an EdgeRank system that ironed out its critical intent and parodic import. People played, and maybe people

13 Saif, '29 Games like Cow Clicker', More Games Like, November 12, 2015, accessed June 18, 2016, <http://www.moregameslike.com/20-games-like-cow-clicker-for-android-and-ios/>.

14 Technology journalist Jason Kincaid explains this process in more detail: 'First, there's an affinity score between the viewing user and the item's creator — if you send your friend a lot of Facebook messages and check their profile often, then you'll have a higher affinity score for that user than you would, say, an old acquaintance you haven't spoken to in years. Second, there's a weight given to each type of Edge. A comment probably has more importance than a Like, for example. And finally there's the most obvious factor — time. The older an Edge is, the less important it becomes'. See Jason Kincaid 'EdgeRank: The Secret Sauce That Makes Facebook's News Feed Tick', Tech Crunch, April 2010, accessed March 10, 2013, <http://techcrunch.com/2010/04/22/facebook-edgerank/>.

played sarcastically, but it all inevitably led to the standardized Newsfeed advert: 'I'm clicking a cow' – a disclosure of the user's recognition of its meaningless and empty sort of consumption, which they nevertheless go along with. Presumably, this recognition has always been a part of Zynga's applications. It seems, therefore, that Bogost's game worked too well. And, despite his best intentions, each morning, millions of farmers around the world rise to continue toiling in the digital fields of FarmVille and the empty pastures of *Cow Clicker*.¹⁵ It is partly because of Facebook's valorisation of quantitative data rather than qualitative content that Bogost's *Cow Clicker* did not achieve its intended impact. As long as it produced data (which it did), it was OK: it didn't cause any friction in Facebook's system, despite aiming to criticize its lucrative social game industry. This is perhaps because all activity and communication on Facebook falls under the rubric of 'immaterial labor', which, in Seb Franklin's words, 'describes a radical dispersal of value production into all activity that adds value to an object or service'.¹⁶ These are activities not normally recognized as work, but that, in Facebook's system of production are apprehended as purposeful or productive behavior. Certainly this is related to the apparent failure of Bogost's critique. However, to my mind, the fact that users willingly and enthusiastically participated in its unsatisfying experience demands further pause for thought. This unforeseen effect also caused significant disruption to Bogost's critical intention, as its mass of users gleefully affirmed the passive role designated to them by the click-based social game.

Jean Baudrillard believed that the strength of the 'mass' resided in its inertia, its neutrality; its ability to frustrate the logic of the system that addresses it as such. In this respect, the mass never simply 'constitutes a passive receiving structure for media messages'.¹⁷ Whilst the agency of the mass does not dismantle the system that calls it into

15 This phrase is taken from Doug Gross's research into Zynga's FarmVille. We can equally apply it, I think, to Cow Clicker. Gross states that the most common time for users to play FarmVille is between the hours of 8 and 9 am. So it tends to be something people do as soon as they wake up, becoming a part of a morning ritual. Gross, 'The Facebook games that millions love (and hate)'.

16 Seb Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), Kindle edition.

17 Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities... Or, the End of the Social and Other Essays*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnson (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 42.

existence, it has the tendency to undermine it in its use. For instance, it often displays what Baudrillard calls an ‘excess of conformity’ to cultural norms, ‘giving the same coded responses, with the same exasperating, endless conformity, only to better escape’, Baudrillard writes, ‘any definition as object’.¹⁸ Patricia Cormack has usefully glossed Baudrillard’s concept, she explains that:

As a mass, we do not deflect back the messages projected on to us, nor do we take up the projects of History...or the Social...handed to us, but instead enthusiastically take on the formless object position claimed for us. This passivity allows for the absorption of messages and suspension of meaning. When asked to exercise a serious and considered political will, we offer instead an endless delight in popular spectacles. When asked to express consumer preferences, we vacillate capriciously. When asked to be objects of social policy, we refuse to provide or comprehend practical information. Since this system of communication requires that we, as a mass, are at once subjects (with real wants, desires, opinion, wills) and objects (to be addressed, measured, polled, surveyed...) the production of confusion, hyper-conformity, circular talk, contradiction and infinite hesitation works to...neutralise the logic of the media system.¹⁹

It is the awkward aspect, or negative potential of the passivity of the mass, as Baudrillard defined it, an impulsive tendency to do what is, or what seems to be, not wanted, that arguably accounts for the absurd pleasure expressed in the disappointment and boredom of Cow Clicker. Indeed we might argue that it was in this aspect that Bogost’s work achieved some semblance of criticality. After all, Baudrillard’s discussion of the mass was part of his formulation of an agency that does not dismantle, subvert or transgress, as, for instance, the historic avant-garde is often theorised. Instead, he writes, it displays, amongst other things, an ‘immanent form of humour’ that

¹⁸ Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 33.

¹⁹ Patricia Cormack, ‘Masses’, in *The Baudrillard Dictionary*, ed. Richard G. Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 119.

neutralises, confuses and contradicts the system that addresses it.²⁰ Certainly there is a similar sort of humour that emerged on *Cow Clicker*: not the humour of Bogost's satire, but the humour of its users, playing along despite the shoddy experience offered by the game.

The question of 'criticality' in the current context forms the focus of an essay in Hal Foster's recent book *Bad New Days* (2015). Foster seeks to defend the continuing importance of 'criticality' in the contemporary public sphere, despite the many threats to it which he acknowledges, including for instance, the 'real-time' of communication technologies that dissuade reflective thought; the denial of an 'outside' position, or what is otherwise known as *critical distance*, within an age of 'real subsumption'. What Foster means by 'criticality', he explains, is 'resistance to any operation whereby human constructs...are projected above us and granted an agency of their own, from which position and with which power they are more likely to overbear us than to enlighten us'.²¹ So criticality equates to resisting and criticising, or at least exposing mystification and its oppressive functions.

Certainly the culture of our times is characterised by the kinds of oppressive and mystifying operations Foster describes. However, as we have seen with *Cow Clicker*, these oppressive and mystifying operations are often already known: here users are complicit in their own exploitation, meaning there is no need for the demystification tactics of traditional criticism. This was perhaps Bogost's mistake with *Cow Clicker*. He seems to enact the role of the self-important 'courageous critic', discussed in Bruno Latour's essay 'Why has Critique Run out of Steam?' (2004). This is a critic who takes upon themselves the duty of showing 'that what the naïve believers are doing with objects is simply a projection of their wishes onto a material entity that does nothing at all by itself'.²² This figure, Latour writes with tongue firmly in cheek, 'who alone remains aware and attentive, who never sleeps, turns those false objects into fetishes that are supposed to be nothing, but mere empty white screens on which is

20 Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 30.

21 Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London: Verso, 2015), Kindle edition.

22 Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004), 237.

projected the power of society, domination, whatever'.²³ The problem with this position is that the critic, here, for instance, Bogost, does not turn their critical or anti-fetishistic gaze back on their own beliefs. This unreflective belief in the traditions and tactics of criticism and demystification, Latour leads us to suggest, counts as a fetish in its own right. Certainly Bogost did not turn his critical gaze back on the supposed criticality of *Cow Clicker*, which was debunked by its users gleefully played along with a sort of Baudrillardian 'mass humour', in the process confusing and extinguishing its critical claim.

This, I think, brings into the open a significant challenge facing criticality in the contemporary world. It exposes us to the problem of a critical perspective grounded in dated tropes, derived from a time when oppositions such as consumption and production, leisure and labour, criticality and complicity (etc.) were more fixed. In this respect, these so-called 'critical' positions can only perpetuate an implausible representation of our social situation. Now, I think, by contrast these oppositions seem interweaved and twisted together; and I think not just our critical vocabulary, but our critical imaginations – our capacity to imagine new forms of criticism and opposition – must be renewed accordingly. Without question, this is something that we can glean from the putative failure of Bogost's critical social game.

²³ Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?', 238.