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SELL YOUR CARDS TO WHO: NON-FUNGIBLE TOKENS AND DIGITAL TRADING CARD GAMES

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The remediation of analog trading card games (TCG) into digital platforms troubles notions of ownership and highlights the flows of capital through the platforms of trading card games (Altice, 2014; Booth, 2015; Murray, 2020; Švelch, 2016; Trammell, 2019). In 2020, *Doctor Who: Worlds Apart* was announced as an officially licensed digital TCG and marketed digital collectable items for Doctor Who fans with an associated card game. The website boasts that, in contrast to other digital trading card games, players will maintain ownership over their cards through the implementation of Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) as a solution to ownership in digital card games (*Doctor Who - Worlds Apart*, 2021). This paper examines the implications of NFTs in digital card games via the material histories of TCGs to discuss the way that digital TCGs accelerate the extraction of capital from their player communities.

NFTs became the current blockchain related buzzword following the $69 million sale of a work from the digital artist Beeple at Christie's. Beeple's success, combined with a sudden reliance on digital spaces for visibility, the art world latched onto NFTs. Many popular artist have been quick to convert their work into NFTs drawing ire from the online art community (Charlesworth, 2021; Herbert, 2021). To describe them briefly, NFTS are a serialized numerical token that references a specific point of data stored within a blockchain network. In the case of the $69 Million Beeple, the purchaser bought only a token that verifies their ownership of the digital work using the Ethereum blockchain network. One of the larger discussions going on is the ethics behind creating NFT verified digital art, essentially creating "crypto-art" where one person can verify their ownership via the blockchain ecosystem. As such, many of the same criticisms of crypto-currency are now being leveraged against NFTs and tokenized digital art. This includes pointing out the catastrophic environmental repercussions associated with blockchain and the inherent volatility crypto due to the lack of regulation (Rauchs et al., n.d.; Swanson, 2021). NFTs also come with issues relating to artist exploitation from the costs associated with registering tokens and Twitter bots that allow anyone to generate an ownership token for posted content (Marshall, 2021; Palmer, 2021; Purtill, 2021).

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NFTs emerge from two parallel vectors. First, as attempts to recapture the perceived authenticity of material objects. Second, as features of a neoliberal techno-fantasy focused on the extraction and accumulation of value based on the ownership and authenticity of digital commodities. NFTs have been lurking in the background for some time now, but as they become more popular game developers are attempting to capitalize on the fervor associated with the technology.

Traditionally, the physicality of trading cards has been a large draw for trading card communities. This phenomenon can be traced to the late 19th century where the popularity of professional baseball and photography resulted in the creation of baseball cards to market products ranging from cigarettes to gum. Their popularity exploded in post-war 1950s and continued to grow into a thriving industry. The release of Richard Garfield’s *Magic: The Gathering* in 1993 took the concept of trading cards and expanded it by utilizing cards in a game that collectors could play making the cards valuable both as collectors’ items and as components of the game. Similarly, the *Pokémon TCG*, released in 1996, leverages the popularity of the *Pokémon* video games and television show making them even more valuable to fans. *MTG* and the *Pokémon TCG* popular enough to support an industry of local and online markets for individual cards or packs and venues for hosting events. The viability of these businesses relies on physical ownership and artificial scarcity of cards based on collector popularity and power level within the game(Bosch, 2000).

Worlds Apart markets itself as using NFTs to give the illusion of ownership. The claim is that NFTs allow the items to exist externally to the *Worlds Apart* platform, buying into the techno-libertarian dream of a decentralized system for controlling capital (Galloway, 2020). Ownership in *Worlds Apart* is used to assuage player’s fears about shifts in the metagame that render their cards worthless. While the ability to buy and sell individual cards does offer some ability for players to cash out, the model relies on the players shouldering the larger part of the risk. This however ignores how the value of trading cards is established within the community. It also ignores the immense speculation bubble where value is entirely predicated on the perception of value and the ability to verify ownership in a technological system centralized by virtue of the protocols that allow it to function (Chun, 2008; Galloway, 2004). This means that if the database that tracks the cards, the company in charge of the database, or the *Worlds Apart* platform disappear, then access, proof of ownership, and subsequently the value of the digital items evaporates. Further, if the game is not successful then any cards owned by players are devoid of value to begin with.

Digital trading card games represent an idealized version of capital extraction through NFTs. The value of cards in *Worlds Apart* relies on the continued existence of the game and the unnamed publisher. Any capital put into the platform becomes trapped within, allowing it to be exploited for maximum value with minimum output. Many of these issues exist within other digital platforms ranging from trading card games and beyond. Examining *Worlds Apart* highlights the relationships between capital, trading card games, and networked technologies to complicate our approaches to designing, critiquing, and engaging with these different objects.

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