Pay-to-Play: The Utopia for Capitalists in *Black Mirror's* "Fifteen Million Merits"

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes second episode of the popular dystopian sci-fi show Black Mirror*, "Fifteen Million Merits," as a utopia for the capitalists that are in charge of the commune in which the episode's characters live. Through comparisons to American company towns and an analysis of the psychology that these capitalists employ, I come to the conclusion that, while a dystopia for the citizens that the episode follows, this society is a utopia for those in charge. Furthermore, I posit that, even though the community we see is set far in the future and seems very removed from our own world, it may not be as far away as we may like to think.*

In 2018, a major controversy in the world of video games was that of microtransactions. In such popular games as *Fortnite* and *Star Wars Battlefront II*, users were able to use real-world currency to purchase items and advantages in-game. Some of those items were simply cosmetic in nature, such as camouflage for guns and unique outfits for characters, but others granted richer players an advantage over their competition, essentially boiling the stakes of these games down to whomever had the most money rather than whomever had the greatest amount of skill. The latter issue often came in the form of "loot boxes," slot machines in which players would stand a randomized chance of gaining everything from a few units of in-game currency to new weapons and abilities that would ordinarily take a long time to unlock. The problem of loot boxes became clear in games like *Star Wars Battlefront II* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops III*, in which some players who had very little experience and a great deal of money to spend were granted powerful advantages over people that had invested a great deal of time into trying to unlock weapons and abilities the old-fashioned way. Players aren't forced to purchase anything in the game, but they stand the chance of being left at a disadvantage if they don't. Even though there was a massive backlash against this practice from gamers in late 2017 and into 2018, it has not met much prolonged resistance beyond the cases that the media focused on: "Very few players like the microtransaction system but a large majority think its ok as long as the upgrades are just cosmetic" (Anderton). While some of the worst offenders in this controversy backtracked and removed microtransactions from their games (or just confined them to cosmetic items), for better or worse, microtransactions are here to stay.

Microtransactions don't currently affect anyone who doesn't play video games (or who doesn't have children that play them), but what would happen if this concept were applied to our lives in general? This idea of microtransactions becoming a part of daily life is taken to the extreme in "Fifteen Million Merits," the second episode of British writer Charlie Brooker's dystopian science fiction series *Black Mirror*. In this episode, the characters are trapped in some sort of commune in which they are constantly surrounded by screens built into the walls of their rooms and hallways. The residents of the commune are made to spend long hours at exercise bikes during the day, ostensibly to provide power to the commune (though the use of these bikes is never shown), earning a virtual currency called "merits" as they pedal. These merits are required for everything from purchasing food

in the commissary and skipping ads that pop up on the omnipresent screens to getting toothpaste to brush their teeth in the morning. There are only two ways for people to escape the bikes: they can either become a member of the commune's oft-mocked janitorial staff, or they can enter a talent contest known as *Hot Shot*, an *X Factor*-esque talent show in which the contestants could win the opportunity to host own programs (if they're well-received) or be cast in the commune's constantly advertised pornography channel, *WraithBabes*.

The society in which the characters of "Fifteen Million Merits" live is a monotonous hell plagued by constant stimulation, whether they want it or not: if they close their eyes during an advertisement that they didn't skip, the screens turn red and tell them to resume watching while emitting high-frequency whines that grow more painful the longer that the individual refrains from opening their eyes. While it may be a horrible existence for the residents of the commune, this society is a prime example of a capitalist utopia. Brooker, who co-wrote the episode with his wife, Konnie Huq, confirms this: "There was something that appealed to me about the idea of an incredibly reductive…version of capitalism, with the whole of society peddling desperately on… bikes for some coins to spend" (Brooker 32). Everything that takes place within the commune is based upon a system of labor and exchange of currency: those who feed their labor into the system by riding the exercise bikes are rewarded with merits, which they get to spend within the system for both necessities and luxuries. If anyone is not on the bikes, then they are set to work doing other tasks that benefit the commune's economy, either cleaning up the messes of the bikers or producing entertainment for the residents. This same entertainment creates even more spending within the commune's economy: the residents have to either pay for the programming itself or shell out merits to skip advertisements.

The setup of this community resembles the American "company towns" that emerged during the Industrial Revolution. Established by different companies across the United States as living spaces for their workers that would allow them to stay close to work and buy company products, these company towns would sometimes emerge as pleasant places to live, such as in Hershey, Pennsylvania, where workers were provided with "well-planned avenues that were lined with rows of shade trees," "homes with spacious lawns, surrounded with shrubbery and flowers," and working utilities,

telephone lines, and a post office (Coyle). Often, however, these towns would be quite unpleasant, if not downright awful. According to author and journalist Michele Hirsch,

> During the boom in textile, coal, steel and other industries, [workers] often earned what's called scrip instead of real money: a kind of credit they couldn't spend anywhere but the company store, where prices were often higher than elsewhere. Companies in these places often required that workers live in barebones company housing and send their kids to company-built schools, where the boss's perspective was king. (Hirsch)

One of the most famous examples of these substandard company towns was Pullman, Illinois, founded by the industrialist George Pullman in 1880. Pullman "attempted to create a model company town that focused not only on design and planning but the regulation of public behavior . . . Creating a model town that would protect the interests of capitalists and alleviate concerns of working class uprisings was likely one of the most powerful motivations for Pullman's visionary community" (Baxter 653-654). Even though there had been utopian experiments in the United States before, many of them had been unpalatable to middle- and upper-class Americans either because they were based upon socialist principles (like New Harmony, Indiana) or a religion other than Protestant Christianity (such as the Mormons' attempts at utopia in both the east and the west). Pullman's community specifically appealed to this demographic because while "most utopian communities were established with the goals of eliminating the social structures that informed an increasingly corporate, capitalist industrial system," Pullman's explicit goal was to perfect these structures (Baxter 654-655).

Pullman's utopia, which is now a neighborhood of Chicago, was originally fairly isolated from the rest of the world, the only major connection to Chicago being a passenger railway. There were myriad amenities in the city: markets, theaters, libraries, parks, banks, and a non-denominational church—which could be rented out by anyone—were available for all to use (Baxter 655-656). The catch, however, was that the skilled workers and executive personnel were given better homes and better locations, living much closer to all of these perks of the town and the eyes of visitors, while the unskilled workers were relegated to the fringes of the city (Baxter 656). The services that the town provided also came with the caveat that everything was regulated by Pullman and his company: liquor stores were illegal, the books in the library were chosen according to Pullman's discretion, and the

company was always the one to arrange which performances were allowed to take place in the theater (Baxter 656). To keep the town profitable, Pullman set very high rents to both compete with those of Chicago and to fold the town's costs into the workers' bills (Baxter 656). Everyone in the town was technically working for the good of the community, but at great personal cost to themselves. This system was tolerated for fourteen years, but the company eventually overstepped its bounds: "Pullman lowered wages in 1894 in the wake of an economic depression, but refused to lower rents and other charges at the same time. Workers rose up, leading to a strike and boycott that eventually involved as many as 250,000 workers in 27 states, resulting in up to 30 deaths, millions of dollars lost and months of disrupted rail traffic" (Hirsch). The government eventually sent troops in to break up the strike, effectively ending the capitalist experiment. Pullman's utopia failed because he refused to take into consideration the needs of his lower-class workers; he didn't realize that it wasn't a utopia for everyone and paid the price for his ignorance.

Despite being set over a century in the future, the world of "Fifteen Million Merits" is incredibly similar to communities like Pullman's. Just like the workers in company towns were only paid with scrip that was good at the local store, the merits that the people in *Black Mirror* are paid with are (as far as the viewer can tell) only good for purchasing items within the commune itself. Furthermore, everything is regulated and priced; even the smallest drop of toothpaste squeezed out of a dispenser or a pump of soap after going to the bathroom will cost you merits in this world. The products that they serve to the workers for merits are also marked up in cost, just like the items that would be for sale in company towns. While there are no outside prices to compare the merit totals to, when the main character, Bing Madsen, is getting lunch early in the episode, a woman who rides a bike near his helps him to get an apple out of the vending machine in the commissary. When she pulls it out of the machine, she says, "Almost the only real thing in there, and even that's grown in a petri dish" ("Fifteen Million Merits" 00:05:48-00:05:50). If that's the case—if the food that is being sold in the commissary really is grown from petri dishes—then that means that it was likely produced at very little cost to those that run the commune. For Bing, meanwhile, that apple and an energy drink cost 5,500 merits. By creating the products that they give the residents at such low costs and charging them exorbitant amounts of merits, the leaders of the commune in which Bing lives are able to reap

great rewards, if not in cash, then in the energy that is ostensibly being created by the bikes. Furthermore, the very fact that the merits are digital rather than physical makes it that much easier for these people to flagrantly spend their money. Since everything costs so much and everyone willingly buys into the system, the residents are forced to ride their bikes for long hours of the day if they hope to keep living in relative comfort.

Yet another way that the leaders of this community keep people sedate and compliant is by blurring the lines between "reality" and what is truly "real." While those terms may seem to mean the same thing, that is not the case for Bing and his coworkers. For them, "reality" is a constructed existence that takes place both within and in tandem with the computer systems installed throughout the building. When they use the computers for tangible rewards, they are given artificially grown food and opportunities to compete in contests that only codify the system further. All other rewards are digital; these people are obsessed with getting new accessories (similar to "skins" from video games) for their avatars, even though these digital characters aren't real and have no bearing on the daily functions of their lives. Even though the products they buy both in and out of the computers aren't really "real," they are part of the reality that the leaders of this commune have carefully built to sustain the illusion of self-determination and choice.

As if the exceedingly high prices and deliberate obfuscation of reality weren't enough, the people living in this community are constantly reminded of the merits that they spend. There is a small counter with everyone's current merit totals at the bottom of every screen, and whenever anyone buys something, the total immediately drops to account for the purchase. While this seems like a handy way to keep track of one's money, almost like an ever-present banking app, the merit counter is, in fact, reinforcing the economy as it stands. In an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, professors John T. Gourville and Dilip Soman provide an example of this phenomenon using gym memberships: if one person pays $600 up front for a year of membership, while a second person pays $50 a month for a year, the second person will, in fact, use the gym more. Even though they're paying the same cost for the membership, the first customer will see their "drive [to exercise] lessen as the pain of his $600 payment fades into the past. [The second customer], on the other hand, will be steadily reminded of the cost of her membership because she makes payments every month. She will

feel the need to get her money's worth throughout the year and will workout more regularly," and, because of this, "[The second customer] will be far more likely to renew her membership when the year is over" (Gourville and Soman). Just like the second customer, the people in "Fifteen Million Merits" are constantly "renewing their membership," so to speak; they spend money on food, toothpaste, television programs, and everything else, and each time they do this, their merit counts fall right before their eyes. These people, therefore, are induced to enjoy and use everything that they buy, giving them the idea that they are benefitting from this society and keeping them coming back for more.

Despite the lack of meaning and obsession with consumption that dictate the lives of the people living in the commune of "Fifteen Million Merits," these residents still believe that they are living in a utopia. Many of them are shown to be happy with the lives they are given, gleefully going along with the lewd and disgusting programming that is shown (programming based largely upon sexual harassment and fat-shaming) and spending their money on outfits for their virtual avatars or programs to hypnotize them into having pleasant dreams or eating healthier. They even compete to be the most productive in this system, with leaderboards keeping track of who has pedaled the most on a given day being used as "another way to reinforce the behavior…and it fosters that competitive spirit, makes [them] want to be the best," factoring into the capitalist ideal of being rewarded for greater contributions to society and the economy ("The Psychology of Black Mirror" 00:24:35-00:24:45). Aside from minor complaints from various characters, there are only two instances of public resistance to the amorphous regime in place. The first comes when Bing donates fifteen million merits, which he received from his deceased brother, to a woman he has a crush on, Abi. Bing gives her this money to get her a spot on *Hot Shot*, hoping that she may escape the mechanical drudgery of everyday life if she wins. Before she goes onstage, the crew gives her a mandatory juice box filled with a drink called "Cuppliance," and she immediately feels as though "everything just went wider apart" ("Fifteen Million Merits" 00:30:07-00:30:08). After she sings, the judges admit that she is a good singer, but say that she doesn't have what it takes to be a stand-out contestant and urge her to become an actress on *WraithBabes*. She initially resists, but the drug that she ingested before the performance makes her confused and more pliable to both the suggestions of the judges and the jeers

of the crowd watching behind them; as Bing realizes what's about to happen, he calls her name and starts to run onstage but is immediately seized by the crew and dragged away.

Here we see society being kept in line by themselves once again; however, the root cause this time is not capitalist principles, but mob mentality. During screenings of *Hot Shot*, the audience isn't actually at the show; rather, they are viewing it in their cells or on their televisions and their avatar becomes part of a virtual crowd behind the judges. This physical disconnect and anonymity allows the viewers to emotionally detach themselves from what they see onstage. Even if these people have worked with Abi in the bike rooms, she turns into just a character on the television. This makes it easier for a herd mentality to take over when the judges send people like Abi into the pornography industry; without an emotional connection to Abi anymore, these people are willing to follow the whims of the most authoritative figures on the show, those being the judges. In creating such a dynamic between the powerful members of this society and the everyday workers, the leaders of this commune have turned the residents into their own oppressors. As psychotherapist Michael Drane says, "Even though they're all part of the system, they're all just as screwed as she is. They are a necessary tool of influence" ("The Psychology of Black Mirror" 00:56:23-00:56:33).

When Abi agrees to become a porn star, the rage and remorse that Bing feels drives him to exhibit the second example of resistance to the regime in this episode. He saves up another fifteen million merits and goes on the show himself, smuggling in Abi's empty Cuppliance cup to trick the crew into letting him go on without having had a drink. He starts by performing a short dance routine before pulling out a large shard of glass and threatening to cut his throat unless they allow him to say what he wants to say. He goes on to eviscerate the judges, the system they stand for, and the way that all the citizens of the commune are living:

> All we know is fake fodder and buying shit! It's how we speak to each other. How we speak to each other, how we express ourselves, is buying shit. What, I have a dream? The peak of our dreams is a hat for our doppel. A hat doesn't exist! It's not even there! We buy shit that's not even there! Show us something real and free and beautiful, you couldn't. It'd break us. We're too numb for it. Our minds will wonder whatsoever, you dole it out in meager portions, and only then till its augmented and packaged and pumped through ten thousand pre-assigned

> filters, till it's nothing more than a meaningless series of lights, while we ride, day in, day out, going where? Powering what? All tiny cells and tiny screens, and bigger cells and bigger screens…
>
> ("Fifteen Million Merits" 00:52:56-00:53:42)

The crowd watching *Hot Shot* is silent until one of the judges praises Bing's tirade as "the most heartfelt thing [he's] seen on this stage since *Hot Shot* began and offers Bing a deal: he can get off the bikes if he live streams two such rants for a half hour every week for entertainment. After some hesitation, Bing takes the deal. The society in which they live even finds ways to make protests part of the machine: if they can't silence a dissenter, then they convince him to prostitute his rants for his own profit. Just as they do with everything else, the leaders of this society take anything that even approaches being real—such as Bing's tirade—and funnel it into the reality that they want their workers to believe in. Where George Pullman was ignorant of the desires of his workers and used force to keep them in check when his carefully regulated media didn't work, the leaders of the community in "Fifteen Million Merits" instead cater to what their residents desire and use underhanded means such as drugs and bribes to stop anyone who isn't lulled into a consumptive coma by the constant deluge of stimulation.

All of the capitalistic elements of this society aside, it also seems as though it could be a spin on a socialist utopia. Even though individuals are given the opportunity to stand out on *Hot Shot,* homogeneity is for the most part praised above all else. All of the rooms in the complex look almost exactly the same; the residents all wear the same blank, gray outfits; they are all expected to be updating their online counterparts to supposedly express their individuality, even though they're forsaking their independence from the rest of the commune in doing so; and those that do not conform to this society's ideal of the perfect worker (namely, those who are not fit enough to be constantly riding the bikes) are shamed for their "deficiency." Personal possessions are also not allowed for those that are not given special privilege by winning their own program on *Hot Shot*; Abi is fond of making origami animals out of waste paper before she is forced into pornography, but they always have to be thrown out at the end of the day. Furthermore, if the bikes are in fact powering the installation in which they live, then they are all implicitly working for the common good by riding

them all day long; without the power from those bikes, the entire community would cease to function correctly. Its barter economy shows that it can't be an all-out communist society, but it could easily be a socialist one where everyone is working together for the good of the group. As professor James Brennan writes in *Why Not Capitalism?*, however, "There is an essential asymmetry in the capitalist and socialist versions of utopia… Capitalists allow socialism, but socialists forbid capitalism….A capitalist utopia would allow people to form communes, but a socialist utopia would forbid [one] from owning a factory by [themself]" (Case). Applying this statement to "Fifteen Million Merits" shows that this society must be a capitalist utopia rather than a socialist one. There are qualities of both capitalism and socialism in the community, but since capitalism can allow socialism but socialism can't allow capitalism, that means that a capitalist utopia must be the correct designation for this establishment.

The society in which Bing and Abi live, while unsettling, may still seem quite out of reach. Even though many of the concepts used by Brooker are part of modern society, the extent to which this world has gone appears to be far beyond the realm of possibility. In daily life, however, we can see aspects of it creeping in. In games with microtransactions, the companies that produce them are able to rake in large profits with very little effort by creating the illusion that their system is unavoidable if one wants to compete with other players in both the actual gameplay and the visual appeal of the gaming experience. We also see this business model in luxury hotels: you have the base charge for the room, and you aren't required to pay for anything else; however, if you wish to enjoy the services of the pool, the snacks and drinks in the room, or even the convenience of a Wi-Fi password, you're forced to pay more. When this same idea is applied to somewhere in which residents are not able to leave by choice, such as in private, for-profit prisons, the owners of such complexes are able to make a fortune.

Beyond microtransactions, there are numerous other examples of how modern society is already showing characteristics of Brooker's dystopia. Streaming services offer constant entertainment for those willing to pay, and customers can pay even more to bypass ads in their programming, just like the citizens in "Fifteen Million Merits." Citizens are expected to go to their jobs and "contribute to society" every single day, whether they enjoy their jobs or not, and often have

to pay exorbitant prices at company cafeterias quite similar to that in which Bing eats. Increasing numbers of people, especially children, are perfectly willing to spend real-world currency on virtual perks and cosmetics, things which don't really exist and which don't enhance one's life in any way, like a new piece of armor for a character or the ability to perform a specific dance move or say a line of dialogue known as an "emote" to gloat after defeating an enemy. A study of 1,000 players of *Fortnite* showed that almost 70% of players had spent money on the game, and the average amount spent among those players was about $85 (Tassi). The game itself, at least in its beta form, is completely free.

Talent shows like The *X Factor* and *American Idol* are also dangled over our heads as ways to escape from day-to-day drudgery, and those that don't make the cut for a so-called "good" job (either because of a lack of experience or higher education or for another reason) are relegated to positions such as janitorial staff and looked down upon by those who work in the same building. Those that genuinely start out to criticize the institutions of modern society can end up becoming PR giants and becoming focused on their own popularity rather than the cause in which they may have initially believed. On both social media and online gaming platforms, people are exposed to constructed realities everyday, with amorphous algorithms determining what they are or are not exposed to at any given moment. These environments also create vicious instances of mob mentality, which in the worst cases have lead to suicides and accidental deaths, such as when gamers have emergency services to a location where they are not needed and have inadvertently caused people's deaths. The only things missing are the claustrophobic living quarters and ubiquitous wall screens, and those are both not out of the realm of possibility.

Just because a place is considered a utopia by some doesn't mean that it is indeed a perfect society. Just as the Soviet Union was intended to be a communist utopia but devolved into a socialist dictatorship, so can a capitalist utopia begun with either the best or worst of intentions become a center of exploitation that uses competition and isolation to drive its residents to fuel the machine that controls the community, be that machine an industrial-era company or an invisible leadership, as is the case in "Fifteen Million Merits." It may be a utopia for those in charge and for those that are willing to submit to a life that consists of only work and meaningless entertainment, but for people

like Abi and Bing, the system is an intolerable and unstoppable behemoth that quashes any resistance that by manipulating them into taking jobs in self-destructive programming to escape the daily slog of riding the bikes. Even though the ultra-confined society present in the second episode of *Black Mirror* may seem as though it is far from the current reality, a closer look seems to signal that it could arrive much sooner than one might think. In the blink of an eye, everyone may be scrambling to earn their fifteen million merits.

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