ABSTRACT
This paper is a cultural studies analysis of the Microsoft computer video game, ZooTycoon™. Through a critical reading using the “circuit of culture,” questions of the gamer’s subject position, the role of wildlife and implicit and explicit messages about contemporary attitudes toward the environment are explored. Drawing on Susan Davis’ book, Spectacular Nature: Corporate Culture and the Sea World Experience (1997), this paper unpacks the virtual theme parks created in Zoo Tycoon™ for their (dis)continuities with Davis’s findings. The virtual animals are found to serve as both labor and products in this game that teaches capitalist business strategy and managerial skills. This popular culture text is an example of a product that harnesses the environmental impulse and redirects that impulse back into commodity capitalism.

“(I)t is the uses to which nature simulations are put that we should worry about, the stories about environmental crisis that are left untold and the limits on our ability to imagine solutions”

Susan G. Davis, Spectacular Nature, p.238
"The lions are unhappy." For most of us, responding to the discomfort of a giant feline that inhabits the wilds of Africa would not be a priority—unless one is playing *Zoo Tycoon*, Microsoft's "family-friendly" CD-ROM game which "has sold more than 1 million copies" to children and adults since its release in October 2001. Once you load *Zoo Tycoon*, jungle noises—growls, roars, and exotic chirping—begin emitting from your computer's speakers. After a quick computer-assisted walk through of the game's rules, techniques, and strategy, you are off and running your own zoo. The game's vivid simulation of an actual park on the screen transports the player into an environment that he or she completely controls. As a cultural artifact, the game offers a unique site of inquiry into contemporary questions about humans' relationship to the natural world. Geared toward children and young adults, the game serves as a space to examine the ways in which environmental messages are represented in popular culture, outside traditional news and public affairs venues. What is evident from the outset is that this game reconfigures narratives of nature and capitalism to create a new virtual tool that redirects environmental impulses back into the commodity form, replete with the classic tensions between labor and management. For example, as one reporter notes, "once you get tired of watching your animals and guests interact in this wonderland, you can set the lions loose, make the lemurs sick, and shut down the concession stands so whining patrons go hungry."2

This essay offers a cultural analysis and "reading" of the Microsoft computer game *Zoo Tycoon*. Drawing on the cultural studies model of the "circuit of culture" (du Gay et al., 1997), this study focuses on the production, representation, and identity components of this circuit, leaving audience consumption and regulation for further research. Also, concepts gleaned from Susan Davis's (1997) research on the theme park *Sea World* are also applied to this game in which players build virtual theme parks—zoos. Specifically, this essay addresses the following questions: How is the environment (wildlife) positioned in this game and what role does it play in the game? What is the subject position of the game player? What are the definitions of success within the game? What does this game tell us about contemporary attitudes about wildlife and environmental issues?

**ZOOTYCOON™, GAMES, AND POPULAR CULTURE**

*Zoo Tycoon™* falls within a long tradition of games that merge popular subject matter and a competitive economic structure. The precursor to
the video game, the board game, has received minimal scholarly research attention (Huizinga 1959; Caillios 1961; Seiter 1993; Opel 2002). Huizinga (1959) broadly defined games to be “a temporary function” that “adorned” and “amplified” life (9). Caillios (1961) challenged this simplistic notion, arguing that games can serve a “diagnostic” function within a civilization, providing “indications as to the preferences, weakness, and strength of a given society at a particular stage of its evolution” (83). Following this tradition, Seiter argued that the socialization of young children can be heavily influenced by the media industry’s gender constructions and reification of consumerist values through product advertising.3 At an early age young boys and girls learn very specific ideas about identity, place, and power of the depictions of children in magazine ads and television commercials. Seiter’s analysis, grounded in critical and feminist theories, suggested that “toys and children’s television deserve to be studied as complex, hybrid manifestations of adult culture, which are engaged in various and contradictory ways by different children under different circumstances” (10). For example, in Seiter’s (1993) analysis of magazine ads in Parents, she explained that girls were depicted as housewives, or nurturers “caring for their toys” as opposed to actually “playing with their toys.” Young girls appear tied to household tasks, and are exclusively relegated to taking care of their husbands and children. Boys on the other hand are not usually portrayed in the context of the home. Instead, they are shown playing in magical lands and space-scapes playing with action figures. Further, aggressive ad placement during Saturday morning cartoons on network television has allowed industries to tap into a younger impressionable market encouraging them to spend—not because they need to, but because it will make them happy. Games and the advertisements that promote them have been shown to contain an underlying theme of happiness derived from products, a key theme in this analysis.

Seiter suggests cultural products contain underlying instructions for how we should consume and participate in a capitalist ideology. Toys and the advertising images that promote them facilitate a “creative process of consumption” loaded with dominant ideologies (10). Seiter argues that advertising propagates the indoctrination of values such as keeping up with the Joneses, competition, female inequity, patriarchal domination, and filling emotional voids by purchasing products. This replacement of emotional needs with material commodities is also in line with Sut Jhally’s (1995) concept of the image-based-culture. The continual onslaught of
advertising of non-essential products causes consumerist values to become commonplace in popular culture, while systematically ensuring production in a capitalist society where basic needs were largely met. Further, Karliner (1997) describes public relations and advertising campaigns of transnational corporations that have helped feed economic globalization and encouraged the infiltration of Western values and ideology in developing countries. These values include specific ideas about consumption, labor, the environment, and social welfare.

Like most of entertainment, the world created by advertising creates a virtual paradise to which we are encouraged to escape, take refuge, and forget the monotonous everyday. Raymond Williams (1980) charged that nature becomes a kind of utopia for dwellers in the industrialized world. In Problems of Materialism he explains that the environment allows humans, experiencing the doldrums of late capitalism, to seek out natural settings such as campgrounds, parks, and mountains for solace. However, we often fear the wildlife in nature and subsequently attempt to protect ourselves from it—whether it is from mosquitoes or bears—carefully keeping a safe distance from predators. Just as humans mark off territory for camping or designate land for national parks, we also capture animals for the satisfaction of our voyeuristic propensity. The ability to make spectacles of nature and wildlife enables us to feel in control over our environment while systematically preserving it for our own consumption. ZooTycoon™ is an explicit simulation of this tendency.

The more complex, nuanced understanding of the role of games and culture has been picked up by a host of contemporary scholars who research video games. Much of this research has focused on issues of gender (Beasley & Standley 2002; Brown & Witherspoon 2001), violence (Sherry 2001; Funk & Buchman 1996; Scott 1995), the combination of violence and gender (Mahood 2003), and emerging social formations made possible through virtual worlds of networked gaming (Subrahmanym 2000; Turkel 1997; Kinder 1991). This research clusters around a prevention model, where attempts are made to assess the potential negative effects of video games on children. Scott’s (1995) empirical study of children’s aggression levels and violent video games suggested that, “video games may have a greater adverse effect than television because of the active involvement of the player” (122). The interactivity of video games allows players to immerse themselves in virtual worlds. What’s more, the rapid growth of
new communication technology has led to faster, more vivid, and realistic video games. While this essay departs from a focus on violence, the immersive effects of video games as a genre remain consistent, creating a space where social norms and attitudes are recreated and reinforced.

While the issue of gender has received scholarly attention in the video games literature, *ZooTycoon™* avoids a definite gender orientation, opting instead to offer players an asexual, omniscient “god perspective.” Arguably, the controlling, dominating, and patriarchal aspects of *ZooTycoon™* are to some extent, masculine. But the game’s perspective is largely asexual, casting the player in the role of park manager with no discernable male/female characteristics. Another point of contrast with the emerging body of literature on video games is the fact that *ZooTycoon™* is a game that engages people of all ages, not exclusively children. Thus the concepts drawn out in this analysis resonate with a body of literature that points to the impressionable nature of children while acknowledging a young adult gaming audience. This essay expands on the dominant sites of race, class, gender, and traditional media effects research on video games, focusing on the oft neglected connections between popular culture and the environment.

Meister & Japp (2002) articulate a compelling set of arguments about the importance of examining the connections between pop culture and the environment, arguing that “the languages and images of popular culture situate humans in relation to natural environments, create and maintain hierarchies of importance, reinforce extant values and beliefs, justify actions or inactions, suggest heroes and villains, and create past contexts and future expectations” (4). This “language of popular culture” is said to permeate our daily lives through the images of advertising, television, and new media, and we argue this includes the games we spend our recreation time playing. Meister & Japp (2002) point out the sharp incongruities between the ubiquity of advertising and popular culture imagery, and our exposure to news and public affairs media texts. Although the vast majority of people in developed countries are besieged by commercial images all day long, the majority of media research concerning environmental representation and attitude formation research has focused on news and public affairs media. *ZooTycoon™* is a game—outside the realm of news and public affairs discourse—that sets very defined parameters for players and simulations of wildlife. These parameters reveal important cultural tendencies and assumptions about the environment.
SEA WORLD AND THE WILDLIFE COMMODITY EXPERIENCE

Susan Davis's (1997) analysis of Sea World offers insight from the real world that applies to this investigation of the virtual world of the ZooTycoon™ theme park. Owned by the major beer producer and manufacturer, Anheuser-Bush, Sea World has embraced the American entrepreneurial spirit and has become a profit-making machine. “The theme park landscape is defined first and foremost as a place where people spend money” (80). Millions flock to the park each year to take a peek at spectacular marine mammals, and in the process, are engaged in a series of financial exchanges including entry fees, inflated food prices, and limitless souvenirs. But Davis’s argument does not simply harangue the exploitative and destructive nature of capitalism and commodified nature; she explains that the Sea World phenomenon constructs specific ideas about the relationship humans have and should have with the marine eco-system. She writes that “the mass-produced, popular culture version of nature is a major source of imagery and information shaping public understandings of environmental and scientific questions” (10). Davis deconstructs the concept of the theme park by suggesting that, through its ability to suspend the judgment of visitors, it becomes another world where fantasy disguises the reality of everyday problems, and corporate solutions to “environmental emergencies” abound. In other words, a theme park's layout, content, and presentation show visitors a world where marine life is sanctified, fun, and magical; where “extraction and pollution can never be connected to exploitation in the human world” (238). It is a place in which animals are frolicking beneath the gentle waves in a fiberglass tank—a world devoid of sickness, extinction, predation, or habitat destruction.

In Davis’s analysis of the Shamu show, she argues that the killer whales are displayed as circus performers, part of a long tradition of “spectacularizing animals” (97). They do tricks and splash visitors while multiple television screens above make the experience feel more like going to the movies than a whale exhibit. It is a production that begins with a bellowing James Earl Jones’s voiceover, which silences the crowd during a brief video presentation that shows the majestic killer whale in the wild. The narration provides a brief history of the species and describes the cultural significance of the mammal. It then highlights the tireless efforts of Sea World to preserve the environment, save whales, and encourage research.
The Sea World experience is a “material expression of a corporate point of view, a reinterpretation of nature and environmental concern, in the husk of a public space” (76). ZooTycoon™ parallels this idea as a virtual expression of this same point of view, positioning players as zoo keeper and CEO.

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ZOOTYCOON™

In describing Sea World, Susan Davis (1997) writes: “Never before have images of nature had such a direct and powerful link to corporate capitalism or such wide dissemination through the mass media” (18). The same can be said for the game ZooTycoon™. ZooTycoon™ is part of a series of “tycoon” games, that go back to Railroad Tycoon (now in its 3rd edition) and includes a growing list of titles such as Roller Coaster Tycoon, Lemonade Tycoon (Hexacto), Trailer Park Tycoon (Jaleco), Mall Tycoon (Global Star Software), Beach Resort Tycoon (Edios Interactive), Casino Tycoon (MonteCristo) Pizza Tycoon (Microprose), Oil Tycoon (Global Star Software—not about Dick Cheney), Golf Resort Tycoon (Activision), Monopoly Tycoon (Infogrames), Ski Resort Tycoon (Activision), Fast Food Tycoon (Activison), and many others. All of these games share a common format in which players are presented with a god-like view of an open landscape awaiting the expansion of trains, roller coasters, or in our case, a zoo. Players must adopt a managerial perspective to balance the demands of a growing industry, in effect role-playing the decision making process of a captain of industry. Common features of these games include managing raw materials, maintaining customer satisfaction, and a gaming imperative to increase profits if the player hopes to “win.”

The stated object of ZooTycoon™ is “to design, build and manage a vibrant zoo where your animals and guests are happy” (ZooTycoon™ 2003). The other “tycoon” games emphasize businesses and as such, serve as a logical platform for mimicking the managerial and commodity aspects inherent in capitalism. These electronic games are part of a lineage of games that model and caricature the excesses of capitalism, including the world’s most popular board game, Monopoly (Anspach 1998). But ZooTycoon™ is different in that it is the only game in this series that involves managing, controlling, and manipulating virtual wildlife. In addition, “real” zoos (the Washington Zoo, the San Diego Zoo, etc.) have traditionally been “public” spaces, supported with public tax dollars and infused with a research
component. Like Sea World, ZooTycoon™ simulates the public space of a research and educational institution within the private pay-to-enter park. At the same time, it offers its commercial public a veneer of environmental concern (Davis 1997, 76). ZooTycoon™ simulates private enterprise where profit is the sole measure of success. ZooTycoon™ is a simulation of a nature park, virtually embodying many of the same messages and contradictions found in Sea World. “Nature simulations made of paint, concrete, and living plants and animals have been part of Western culture for centuries; virtual ecosystems on the computer screen extend that tradition” (Davis 1997, 238). ZooTycoon™ stands out among the “tycoon” games, extending a business and management game model to the realm of commodified wildlife. This notable distinction from the other “tycoon” games is yet another reason for further inquiry into this game.

The political economic perspective in media research describes how media ownership contributes to the production of the culture. Golding & Murdock (1996) assert that the “privatization” of the media industry through corporate ownership coupled with the “declining viability of publicly funded cultural institutions” controls the “direction of cultural activity” (16). Understanding the stronghold of Microsoft over the computer industry including operating systems, hardware and software is integral when exploring the social and cultural impact of this video game. Video games are a part of the culture producing industry, which influence our social construction of reality.

Due to the proprietary nature of market research, Microsoft offered little information in regard to target market and sales statistics for ZooTycoon™. Microsoft’s website is purely designed to provide product information, technical support, software and hardware upgrades, and public relations. Of these links, public relations was the most helpful, but only provided superficial information such as “top selling game” or “top-ten game based on total U.S. retail sales” (Microsoft, 2003).³

Nevertheless, the public relations press releases did provide some useful information about how successful the game was from 2001–03. In addition, there was some inference as to what demographic the game targeted, but not necessarily what specific demographic Microsoft expects will actually purchase the game. In 2001, Microsoft had sold over 1 million copies of ZooTycoon,™ which clearly signified it as a success in the video game market. In September 2002, ZooTycoon™ was rated as “Microsoft’s top-selling Family PC Game.”⁶ Initially, when the game was released in 2001,
the suggested retail price was $69.95 (Be a Zoo 2003). The game's actual price is generally around $20–$25 in most retail chains. Moreover, the game is palatable to a wide range of children and adults in part because it is largely nonviolent and lacks any suggestive sexual content. Although it appears that anyone can potentially enjoy *ZooTycoon*, the game is targeted at children and young adults.

**IN THE PLAYER'S HANDS AND ON THE SCREEN**

Upon first glance of the box, one immediately feels the force and power of the animal world. An elephant is shown charging through the gate of a zoo with its mouth slightly opened, while rearing its massive tusks in a challenging manner. This image is printed on the CD-ROM jacket and instruction manual. When opening the front flap of the box, images of the way the game appears on a computer monitor's screen are shown. In addition, seven yellow captions appear which highlight exciting aspects of the game. One reads, "Increase profits by charging for rides, gifts, and food," while another exclaims, "Beautiful zoos will attract more guests, and their money" (Microsoft 2003). Apparently, the excitement of controlling a zoo for profit is one of the most alluring features of the game. In the same vein, on the back of the box, in the left-hand corner a larger caption reads: "A Wild Way to Make A Living." Clearly, the game inculcates the idea of profiting from running a virtual zoo and offers the players a chance first and foremost, to practice owning and running a business. The rest of the text says, "You're in charge of a real zoo," "Keep everyone happy and you'll be a *ZooTycoon™*" (Microsoft 2003). It appears that maintaining order, happiness for guests, and becoming a "tycoon" are attractive features of a recreational game. In another context, these activities could be viewed as work or a job. Finally, on the bottom of the box, rating information indicates that the game is for "everyone," even though it contains mild violence. It suggests that just about everyone can enjoy the thrill of controlling wild animals, placing them in cages for display, and making money while doing it. Vivid blue and green colors also supply the backdrop for the packaging, which add to the green-friendly appearance of the packaging (Smith 1998).

Once the game is loaded into the computer, sounds such as roars, squeaks, jungle noises, and images of animals immediately flood the screen. After the game developer's logo, *Blue Fang Games*, pops up on the monitor, the option to do a tutorial session appears. Essentially, this function
enables the player to walk through an already constructed zoo to get a handle on the rules of the game, and how to accrue points by effectively purchasing animals, building an infrastructure to house the animals, and constructing concession stands for guests. There is a feeling of power as the cursor drags across the screen. On the left hand side of the screen icons enable the player to construct fences, walkways and restrooms, and to choose any animal he or she desires to place in their virtual zoo. With each click of the mouse, the player is able to zoom-in on other sections of the park, or pan the entire landscape. Most of the game playing occurs through selecting various icons on the left of the screen, which execute tasks. For example, a player can select a “small house icon,” which enables the player to place a bathroom or gift shop on any space on the screen. Some icons resemble “fences and gates,” while others symbolize specific terrain for the animals such as “savannah grasslands,” “rainforest floor,” and arid dirt. Moreover, a variety of trees and foliage can be placed in any animal’s fenced-in area. There is also an option to place walkways, grass, and benches for guests.

Clouded leopards, lions, giraffes, elephants, and gorillas are among the selections for display, which include purchase prices that can range from $500 to $1,600. The animals magically appear without the slightest reference to their actual place within an ecosystem or the process involved in capturing a wild animal and keeping it alive in captivity. For each animal, a small map indicates the region of the globe where they live. This small educational component is reinforced by a virtual zoo keeper who offers advice on what the animals need to keep them “happy.” This aspect of the game allows players to learn about the diet and habitat of a broad range of animals, albeit in the confines of a zoo. As we will discuss, the game allows players to choose the type of park to build (e.g., “city zoo”) and the level (e.g., intermediate) of game play. The game starts players with $75,000 to $100,000 to begin buying items to start the zoo. Once one makes purchases, one’s budget is depleted depending on the size of the item. As in “real world business,” one has to spend money to make money to be a ZooTycoon.™ Moreover, each park has a certain time frame to finish construction, which is usually 6 to 12 months. If the player does not finish by the deadline, they lose the game. Interestingly, one of the tips for making more money when the player is running “low on funds for park modification” is to sell trees and other foliage.

In the lower right-hand corner a window provides points scored,
financial information, and advice from hired trainers. This helps the player plan where to place certain amenities for guests and necessities for the animals. The player must constantly monitor the health and happiness of zoo patrons and wildlife. During the game, several informative flashing captions tell the player that, “Gorilla 1 is unhappy,” or “the guests need bathrooms or need places to sit.” This pursuit of happiness is endless as the needs of both the animals and the customers expand to meet the current conditions. Thus a significant portion of game play is spent trying to keep animals and customers “happy.”

Happiness is a central theme throughout the game—keeping animals and customers happy is the primary indicator of the path to financial success. The treadmill feeling of continually meeting new “happiness” demands on the part of animals and customers is similar to the insatiable needs fostered and sustained by consumer society. Recent studies have pointed out the complexity of attempting to predict what will make humans happy (Gertner 2003), and the notion that animal “happiness” can be known and achieved in the confines of captivity is problematic at best. Nevertheless, ZooTycoon™ offers clues for making each of the animals happier and as players adjust the food, cage, terrain, or surrounding plant life, the animals achieve a temporary happiness. This happiness is short-lived as new accoutrements are desired by each animal in their endless pursuit of happiness. Thus the animals take on the role of humans living within a consumer society—endlessly hungry for the next gadget or greasy sandwich. At the same time, the animals’ happiness is merely a means to an end, ultimately serving to increase the zoo customers’ quality of experience and to allow a higher entrance fee to be charged. Thus the game becomes a microcosm of the production process under capitalism, with animals acting as labor and product, receiving incremental benefits that add value to their commodified selves.

**IN A REALM OF FANTASY—OR RUNNING A REAL ZOO?**

A player has three major objectives when playing ZooTycoon™: clearing land for infrastructure, hiring staff, and maintaining animal and guest satisfaction. Of course, a successful player must accomplish economic goals as well. These include making sure that these objectives are fulfilled under budget and to gain a successful rating within a certain time frame. The game provides a park status report that informs the player of how well they are managing the zoo. In addition, this window explains all of the
financial information. The player is transformed from a person engaged in a leisure activity into a business manager. As the game progresses, the player scurries around the park with his or her cursor, which resembles a white glove or arrow depending on the action, to quickly assess the zoo’s condition. Changes to the park appear with a click of the computer mouse, without signs of labor or materials. Time management also appears to be an important skill for running the park successfully. The player is constantly reminded of the time remaining to complete their zoo. In addition, if funds begin to decrease the game advises the player to sell the foliage in the surrounding landscape to avoid bankruptcy. Here, we can see the inculcation of venture capitalism by the player’s constant compulsion to keep an eye on the bottom line. The game accentuates the need to continually devise ways to increase funds and profit. *Zoo Tycoon™* allows players to open restaurants, gift shops, and amusement rides, in addition to cheese burger, pizza, and ice cream stands. An overwhelmingly emphasis is placed on accumulation of wealth as opposed to feeling excited about creating interesting environments for animals from disparate regions of the world.

The god-like view of the zoo created onscreen furthers the emphasis on profit, leaving customers and animals as diminutive icons moving about aimlessly. Instead of allowing players to assume a human perspective where they might be able to act as a trainer and get into the cage with an animal, *Zoo Tycoon™* lets you click on a small animal icon to get information that helps you maintain happiness. This distance from wildlife creates a significant barrier to environmental education, omitting images and details that would allow players to learn more about the animals they are housing in their zoos. One can hardly make out a black rhinoceros’s horn or clearly see a leopard’s spots. Further, the animals are depersonalized because they are assigned a number such as Zebra 1 or Zebra 2. The animals become less like living species and more like exhibits which require maintenance in order to boost profits. Again, the animals serve as stand-ins for both labor and product. They must be kept happy in order to attract customers who are paying to consume the spectacle of “wildlife.” This subtle aspect of the game reinforces strong meanings about the consumptive nature of the relationship between humans and wildlife.

The player is constantly involved in trying to appease animals and guests while hoping to remain under-budget. An overriding theme of managerialism with each click of the mouse—one’s every desire is immediately fulfilled. If a player decides to build a walkway, he or she can choose
the type of brick or stone. Moreover, the player controls the type and quantity of male and female animal(s) that are displayed in the zoo. One has a sense of complete control over the environment—complete eco-dominance. Although the game does inform the player of an animal's sickness, the player relays the responsibility onto a zookeeper or maintenance manager. There is little direct responsibility felt by the player for problems created by him or her in their virtual park, as the pressure of time forces players to continually move on to another section to build space for more animals and guests. Essentially, the player is detached from any simulation of real problems at a real zoo. This echoes Davis's (1997) assessment of Sea World's tendency to distract visitors of the reality of wild animals' health in the wild and the darker side to their behavior. Like Sea World, ZooTycoon's "spectacle of nature provides more anesthesia than challenge for the serious spatial and environmental problems of daily life" (p.75). ZooTycoon™ provides some detail about the animal's diet and preferred environment, though offers zero information on the state of these animals or their habitats in the real world. Players assume they can "buy" a cheetah, but are never informed that the viable gene pool of cheetahs in the wild is approaching an extinction threshold and their habitat is steadily shrinking.

The ability to manipulate population sizes of animals is an indication that the game imbues a real sense of superiority of humans over wildlife. Animals are picked out of a line up of icons ranging from Anteaters to Zebras. At the player's whim, they are picked up by the white glove cursor and placed anywhere he or she wishes. Further, the ability to choose the sex of the animal is particularly disturbing because it allows players to breed animals. Clearly this is not the reality in many zoos, as trying to get exotic animals to reproduce in captivity is an arduous and sometimes impossible task. The control over the wildlife seems to suggest that ZooTycoon™ fosters broader notions of modernism, industrialism, and a technocratic consciousness towards nature where human intervention can yield happy, captive wildlife.

The Microsoft website that offers tips and tricks for ZooTycoon™ sheds further light on the ideological nature of this game. In response to a question about how to increase profits at the park, the FAQ offers the following suggestions: "1) Raise the price of admission," "2) Raise the price of concessions" and if these fail, "3) Cheat" (Microsoft, 2003). These gaming strategies reiterate Davis's contention that theme parks are designed to get people to spend money at the same time that they reinforce a
core principle of unregulated markets: cheating. Cheating is always an option in *ZooTycoon*.™

The game allows cheating and, indeed, the software makers promote it as an acceptable gaming strategy. Examples of real world cheating within capitalism include toxic superfund sites and the collapse of Enron, the largest corporate failure in the history of the world. There is more than a bit of irony in the fact that the developer of this game, Microsoft, encourages cheating. *Microsoft* has been the target of some of the largest antitrust lawsuits for unfair business practices in recent U.S. history. The fact that the company, owned by the world's richest man, Bill Gates, is the developer and distributor of a game that models the behavior of a tycoon at the expense of representations of wildlife offers some insight into the ideological assumptions packed into this popular video game.

DISCUSSION

In her conclusion to *Spectacular Nature*, Susan Davis (1997) wrestled with the question of the broad appeal of theme parks. Davis wrote: “Once inside the park, I found it harder than before to imagine an alternative to it. It was hard to imagine a different San Diego landscape, the rest of Mission Bay, another kind of park—another way of looking at animals and thinking about environments. I came home from one of these visits and scribbled in my field journal, ‘They Won!'” (235). In contrast to this, our experience playing *ZooTycoon*™ left us with a wealth of possibilities for different computer games. As Davis noted, *Sea World* contains “firm boundaries that limit and direct the possibilities that a visit to the theme park can hold” (115). The experience is said to be “predetermined” in many ways. The same can be said for *ZooTycoon*,™ as the game establishes time limits and money as the primary measures of success. As a way to shed light on the limits of *ZooTycoon*,™ we would like to imagine some alternatives.

Given the popularity of the Keiko killer whale rescue story that became the basis of the *Free Willy* movies, we imagined a game based around liberating animals from inhumane captivity. Once liberated, information would be provided that would help players reintroduce rescued animals into the wild. Or, what about a game where players defend animals from poachers? This could include the action of a first-person shooter with information about the animals being protected and the current threats to their survival. How about a Jane Goodall “live with the animals game,” where players mingle with different species, learning about their complex
social systems, diets, habitats, and contemporary conservation efforts? This could include detailed, up-close graphics and photographs and digital movies of the animals. What about a clean-up the beach after an oil spill game where players are rewarded for the number of animals they save? The very possibility of these games, and the humor in thinking about them, are indicators of just how accustomed we have become to accepting popular culture texts that offer very limited possibilities for re-conceptualizing our world. Unlike Davis, we do not have a hard time imagining alternatives to the commodified, consumer culture recreated in ZooTycoon.™ Yet persistent questions remain: Why is nature so often appropriated as a commodity and why are games so often designed around capitalist models where money is the sole measure of success? Are these games popular because there are no alternatives or because children in the developing world at the start of the 3rd millennium are predisposed to practicing their inevitable participation in capitalist regimes?

This analysis has revealed that ZooTycoon™ moves the ideological themes identified by Opel (2002)—redirecting environmental impulses back into commodity culture, inversion of notions of public and private, and valorization of avarice—into the electronic, interactive realm of computer video games. This game instills notions of human superiority over wildlife, placing the gamer in the subject position of a captain of industry. Although the game provides information about the animals’ diet and habitat preferences, it makes no attempt to place that information within the context of an unprecedented global extinction of species. The manipulation of animals’ sex and reproduction reinforces the notion that humans can control wildlife—and should—in order to bring guests into the zoo and subsequently make a profit. The de-emphasis on size of the animals, depersonalization, and dull portrayal seems to indicate that animals are on equal footing with the vending machines, there merely to attract paying customers.

The overall premise of ZooTycoon™ encourages human expansion, monopolization of space, and creation of a capitalist place. It subjugates wild animals as menial laborers for our own entertainment and suggests that manipulating the environment any way possible to achieve this is acceptable. Also, inherent in all of the themes presented here, is the encouragement, suggestion, instruction, and indoctrination of the process of commodity production. ZooTycoon™ does more than just edify human consumption of the environment and enlist wildlife in the production process, it says that it is profitable—and fun!
NOTES


3. Seiter argues that parents purchase toys and games to make their children happy. Advertisers are aware of this and carefully design images of toys with happy children. Furthermore, the toys are oriented in such a way that the child viewing the advertisement believes that the toy is a source of happiness. See Seiter, E. (1993).

4. Williams asserts that the relationship between humans and the environment is tied to the economic system of labor and production. He argues that human beings use nature as another commodity, which should be consumed. Yet, we still desire to be free of the trappings of a commodity-based industrial society. So we seek solace in nature to get away from this stifling environment. Williams, R. (1980). Problems in Materialism. London: Verso. 106–24.

5. Upon contacting the local offices, they also stated that they do not have access to sales figures or marketing information. Finally, Blue Fang Games, the game’s developer, was contacted, which resulted in similar responses. They could not provide any recent information and recommended contacting the publisher, Microsoft.


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