

# Radiant Work – The Ethics of Menial Employment and the Manufactured Quest

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**Abstract:** The field of modern work bears striking similarities to the inner workings of leisure pursuits such as the fantasy video games of the Elder Scrolls series in at least one small part – the quests pursued by players are often menial, and serve no explicit purpose save their very existence. Petty remuneration, meaningless aesthetic gifts; these are not fulfilment nor are they worthy reward for the work done to earn them. This work seeks to evaluate the nature of work of this type and do so through a similar analysis of the Radiant AI and the imperatives it doles out to players. Moreover, we shall delve into the issue of depth and nuance in the design of adventure games and the lack thereof when the task of game design is delegated to an AI and will summarily provide insight into enjoyment and fulfilment in the spheres of work and leisure.

**Keywords:** Normative Ethics, Artificial Intelligence, Games, Philosophy of Work, Autonomy

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# 1 Eternal Bears of the Spotless Mind

Walking through a town, you hear a conversation - it's somewhat stilted, and seems to be made entirely of tangents, speaking about thieves, then the price of goods, the weather, then vampires before both participants say goodbye within a half second of one another - before turning a corner to see two law enforcement officers chasing a street magician through some market stalls, knocking over some bread. Picking up the bread, one of the officers turns around, likely snapping his neck and spine with the amount he twists in place, screeching out "Halt! You violated the law!" Whilst a scene likely not out of place in an area populated by the most dedicated improv troupe, it is an example of the Radiant AI technology developed for the *Elder Scrolls* franchise of videogames. In its simplest form, Radiant AI is a game design tool, explicitly to support an immersive experience, fleshing out the worlds a player will inhabit. In the title in which it had its inception, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, it provided characters in the game who were not the player avatar (NPCs<sup>2</sup>) with schedules, personalities, and overall behaviour; Radiant AI strove to making an organic world with minimal active scripting<sup>3</sup>, generating the interactions and traits randomly as players experienced the game - far less code was written for each character than if these behaviours were planned in advance which freed up space on the game disk for other portions of the experience to be added in. Pulling from a library of conversation lines, behaviours, and actions, Radiant AI would assemble lives for NPCs that at least felt written to some degree (Lenhardt 2012). True, depth was absent. Reliant upon the players to infer what the random collation of voice lines and goals that it assembled, Radiant possessed the same flaws that modern generative artificial intelligences such as ChatGPT and NovelAI still exhibit as features today. Without the addition of a human mind, with its ability to construct narratives beyond the surface level, any artificially made characters cannot compare to those that were carefully crafted by writers - but crucially, the characters Radiant made did not have to; their purpose was to make the world and its storyline work, not to themselves have stories.

This especially becomes clear in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, released in 2011<sup>4</sup> with three years and two further games utilising Radiant AI passing by between it and the prior iteration in the *Elder Scrolls* series. *Skyrim* has received numerous releases in the intervening years since its first, and part of the acclaim which has carried it into ubiquity is owed to the effectiveness of Radiant AI at supporting the core design of the game. Radiant has always existed to make the world appear immersive, organic, and full. The danger of a game – especially one wherein the player is there to take part in a world with an overarching story – is that the player will feel a cold isolation, as ‘to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act’ (Arendt 2013 [1958]), action being the main means by which one affects the world, and the effects of those actions measured primarily through the responses to them. The actions of the player have no effect upon the world due to a lack of reactions to them, and a pervasive feeling of emptiness to their tasks beyond those their main objective and those evidently there for plot progression. Being a sequel to *Oblivion*, *Skyrim* enhanced the Radiant AI, building upon it the system of Radiant Story and what now have become known as Radiant Quests by players of games which feature

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<sup>2</sup> NPC is shorthand for Non-Player Character. Any entity in the game which imitates an animate creature is considered thus. In *Elder Scrolls* games this includes a wide variety of creatures, but here we shall be referring to humanoids primarily, and hostile monsters such as bears as enemies. This is for efficiency, and not to cast aspersions upon the ideology of any bears featured in this work.

<sup>3</sup> Scripting here refers to computer code which instructs game elements how to function, as well as the actual words spoken by characters in-game.

<sup>4</sup> And consequently, released on a nigh-annual basis each year since.

missions similar to those which we currently discuss. To remedy the conjoined issues of isolation and emptiness that beset such games, in *Skyrim*, Radiant AI collects player data, and builds quests around the experiences a given player will have had, in locations which they have either not visited or not visited recently. The playable areas in *Skyrim* are populous, filled with NPCs made the same way as in *Oblivion*<sup>5</sup> but also the dungeons (mission areas designed to be filled with obstacles and enemies) were regularly repopulated by the game in relation to the actions of the players. NPCs players have met will offer missions (called quests in the game) usually directing them to a location to retrieve an item, kill an enemy, or interact with something<sup>6</sup>. The area the quest directs them to is populated with enemies of an equivalent level<sup>7</sup> to the player and is often refilled with items suitable as rewards for players beyond the mere opportunity to play more of the game. Sometimes, quests will be as simple as cutting a set amount of wood<sup>8</sup>, or slaying a monster for a cash reward. Often, these quests may be taken multiple times - the Thieves Guild always have more jobs on offer, the Mages of Winterhold always have more magic items and books to fetch, the Assassins have more targets to slay for a purse of gold - and this serves a dual purpose. The world, now filled with people with needs and wants (many of whom have already played a role in the story), feels more real and more alive due to being more akin to the ‘collection of strangers, each pursuing his or her own interests under minimal constraints’ (MacIntyre 2013 [1981]) which a modern society resembles, emulating the chattering voices and desires of other minds than that of the observing agent with vocalisation of those wants; even if many quests read like a mad-libs version of the pre-written equivalents. This additional content will keep players occupied, but never reward them so much as to deter them from completing more story-relevant quests for the treasure they promise.

Once again, we must reiterate that alone, a game of solely Radiant-built non-player characters and Radiant quests would likely not be a compelling one, as many of the Radiant Quests of *Skyrim* rely on inferences made by the player, as little direct implication on behalf of the game world and its players is given beyond the initial provision of the quest. The artificial intelligence upon which the game runs cannot emulate many aspects of human cognition, and falls short when attempting to do so (Whittlestone 2021). "The Burglary Job" is a radiant quest a player may be given from the Thieves Guild. It is a simple one, too - the player must visit the residence of a wealthy NPC and steal an item from them. The explanation given is that the Thieves Guild requires money and wants more of it - with the only stipulation being that the player may not kill anyone on the premises. However, we are given little reason for the thefts to be performed. This is a flaw of the Radiant Story system; its stories and quests will be skin-deep. Aesthetically, it is a complete quest, but lacking in greater depths, like the reasons for stealing the item or why other comparable items are unacceptable. The quest has a list of seven items, and twenty-nine locations, and the game adds the item to the location upon your acceptance of the quest (UESP 2022). Were this a written quest, it would stir intrigue, prompt players to ask why this item was to be stolen and why these wealthy citizens all acquired items recently of similar designs. But it lies with the player to infer such complexity, as this narrative of conspiracy and deceit exists solely in their mind. Many radiant quests are also nonsensical and require significant leaps in

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<sup>5</sup> Namely, game entities with a list of equipment, actions, and voice lines available to them.

<sup>6</sup> We will be using the words quest and mission interchangeably – either refers to a mandated task or series of tasks which promises a reward.

<sup>7</sup> Level is a rough way of gauging the ability of a player – as they play more, they gain experience which translates to an increase in their level and therefore the power at their disposal.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase “Honest pay for honest work” after each farming or woodchopping session feels less congratulatory with each repetition, and more like commiseration for continuing to play.

logic and suspensions of disbelief to assimilate them into the experience. One quest for the warrior faction, the Companions, is even more simple than “The Burglary Job.” “Animal Extermination” is a quest wherein an animal is somewhere it should not be and must be forcibly removed. Provided you have visited an area, you will be told one of forty-two homes in the land of *Skyrim* has an animal of equivalent danger to your level roaming around it. Though, this does prompt ludicrous circumstances that feel artificial at best, and break immersion at worst. Homes in the centre of towns, surrounded by citizens and high walls, with armoured doors and armed guards, can be entered by a bear. No matter where you live, the bear can enter your home like a shadow in the night, unhindered, and begin killing indiscriminately the second the local animal control officer<sup>9</sup> arrives with an axe sharp enough to decapitate it. One could infer a narrative of attempted homicide, of a rogue spellcaster with magic that sends bears into the homes of the unwary. But we know, in our hearts, that the bear in wait of us in the fantasy equivalent of a bedsit is there for one reason. The bear is there to be killed.

Once more, the Radiant AI is seen to exist predominantly as a support to those quests and NPCs which are fully written with cohesive, coherent stories. The goal of *Skyrim* is not to have the player kill bears, but to have them be immersed into the fiction of the world. It is, ostensibly, a role-playing game<sup>10</sup>. The world needs the stealthy metropolitan bears relaxing on the couches of its citizens until the player opens the door, to ensure that the story quests the game presents are immersive, giving the characters beyond those touched by the tendrils of the main story cause to exist, and those involved in the story purpose beyond furthering it. All this is done to make players believe that ‘hidden beneath the reality in which we live...lies a second, quite different reality’ (Nietzsche 1999 [1872]), layering the illusions around the player and thereby supporting their image of the game world as one with nuance – shadows cast from a cave wall to create the pageantry of a living environment. The Radiant AI exists as a distraction, a purpose with no purpose for those characters without agency granted by the narrative. True, within the context of *Skyrim* and its world, bears do have a chance of entering homes, and citizens without combat skill would need someone to kill the interloping animal for them, such as a warrior from a guild not dissimilar to the Companions. But it is undeniably busywork, designed primarily as a distraction to tell the player that the world has a large number of things within it. A fatal flaw of the Radiant AI story system is that aforementioned lack of depth; nuance is absent from the quests it spits out to populate the world, the schedules and conversations of NPCs lacking in rhyme or reason. NPCs will make remarks based upon the actions of the player and their abilities. These voice lines, though, only causes a transparency to the purpose of Radiant AI, as numerous NPCs can spout them at once, commenting on which skills the player is proficient in and which factions the player has gained reputation with<sup>11</sup>. These lines, the radiant quests, the schedules - all of it is with the explicit purpose of artificially building out a world with little effort on the part of the developers and providing busywork to entreat the player to do what matters. After all, most Radiant quests are almost aggressively bland and menial, lacking the depth the main quest may possess and creating the illusion of a busy world full of things to do, and through the boring nature of them driving players towards interesting content (Fisher 2022 [2014]). This is not to say that menial tasks have no place - many quests that contribute to the main story have notoriously included dull or repetitious activities - but that the Radiant quests

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<sup>9</sup> I.e., the player.

<sup>10</sup> Role-Playing Games, or RPGs, are a popular genre of video game, wherein players assume the role of a character in that world – the player in *Skyrim* takes on the part of the Dragonborn, a chosen hero set to save the world.

<sup>11</sup> These cacophonies of congratulation become increasingly common the more the player plays, as the Radiant AI has more to select from to say to you as the criteria for them is met.

are menial tasks for the sake of menial tasks. Aesthetically, they have the appearance of quests and provide rewards which seem rewarding when taken at face value. However, no advantage is provided by having them, no progress is made by earning them. Therefore, we must then conclude of them that Radiant Quests exist to exist.

These are quests that fundamentally do not need to be done – manufactured by the game to provide something to do – and their sole function is to exist, thereby providing busywork with which the player may be occupied and simultaneously giving the impression of an equally busy world replete with characters who possess wants and needs that justify continued play within its confines. One quest is especially egregious in this role. Tolfdir is a character utilised in the College of Winterhold faction of wizards. They are the primary<sup>12</sup> magical faction, and therefore comprised of academics and scientists (magic and science being synonymous in the world of *Skyrim*) such as Tolfdir, an expert in protective magics with a manner similar to a grandparent and the first teacher the player studies under at Winterhold. Befitting the mild senility which the main quest of the wizard faction has portrayed Tolfdir as having, the quest "Tolfdir the Absent-Minded" has the player seek out his alembic, which Tolfdir has somehow lost, a quest which may be repeated, and the location of the item is randomly determined. This has several issues - first, one can find an alembic in his lodgings, unbreakable and immovable, but this one is not acceptable to complete the quest. Second, the alembic is the size of an adult Alaskan malamute, and the only other alembics that may be found in the game are not only glowing and very visible but nailed down and thus impossible to lose<sup>13</sup>. Narratively speaking, Tolfdir has no function outside of the faction quests - he exists to provide exposition and actions that further the narrative, then his purpose is fulfilled once he has done so. However, being a role-playing game, Tolfdir cannot simply vanish as to do so would be inconsistent with the narrative of the world. For him to be the equivalent of a shop window mannequin, silent and unmoving, would shatter immersion like a brick thrown through the shop window that our wizardly mannequin would be stood in. Thus, the Radiant AI steps in. Tolfdir has a schedule in which he brews potions, eats, saunters around, stares at the scenery, reads, and then goes to bed. If the player passes him, they will greet the player, or comment on their magical skills, or offer a quest. However, therein lies the issue - this is without depth. As soon as his plot relevancy ends, so does the exploration of his character, replaced instead with generic voice lines and a nonsensical quest which cannot hope to match up to the characterisation and nuance of the role Tolfdir played in the wholly written portions of the main quest. His quest feels less like an adventure, and more like an errand to remind you of the existence of Tolfdir, and to reassure you that choosing to interact with the narrative and fictional world of the game is a worthwhile decision.

Furthermore, quests like this one are superfluous in the worst way by virtue of being entirely manufactured in terms of necessity. The designers, through their hands, Radiant AI, have divined that Tolfdir needs a reason to exist to the player relevant to the medium of a game in the action-adventure genre – a reason that translates to active participation – and have granted him one, perhaps not realising the rather odd rationale for so doing. Tolfdir, an expert wizard with access to magic that can find objects, requires his alembic, of which he has an entirely functional version that can neither be moved nor damaged sitting in his room, for reasons that are undefined, but does not know where it is due to his poor memory, despite remembering

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<sup>12</sup> Read "only." *Skyrim* has fewer options for magic than its predecessors in the series, perhaps due to lacking the more detailed features of magic found in those titles. However, this is not a critique of the game, merely analysis of one aspect of it. The critique of magic in *Skyrim* is one which has already been litigated by others with more qualifications in less theoretical fields and is perhaps as much an issue of game design as game theory.

<sup>13</sup> It is key to point out here – nobody in the world of *Skyrim* either needs or possesses glasses or visual impairments. The implications therein are staggering in scope.

obscure facts from decades prior<sup>14</sup>. The fiction of the game world conflicts with the solution to uphold it, as Tolfdir could easily locate his alembic and does not even need it in his daily routine. True, we as the player may infer that he wants the item because it is of sentimental value, or that within the college grounds the magic that locates objects is unreliable. But on a fundamental level, the problem is manufactured, and patently so. Not all Radiant quests have this issue - the Dark Brotherhood quests to assassinate targets make sense in-world, even if the targets are randomly generated NPCs added into the world upon receipt of the quest, as logically, the assassins must assassinate as part of their chosen job, and the mechanical creation of NPCs solely to be slain does not conflict with the fiction of the world or eclipse the main quest of that faction all while giving them a reason to exist. But some quests exist primarily as excuses for busywork. They are naught but an excuse to keep playing despite a deficiency inherent to the random generation of the quests themselves, and to remove agency from players – no decision has any impact and thus feels shallow (Nguyen 2020). In such cases, the reason to complete the quest is to complete the quest and little more beyond aesthetic rewards. The “Animal Extermination” quests doled out by the Companions<sup>15</sup> are infinitely repeatable but grant no progression beyond the accumulation of gold and bear skins. A player may complete this quest once, one hundred times, even one hundred thousand times, and the deluge of snow bears in detached houses shall never cease. There is no explanation within the fiction of the game that explains the spontaneous snow bears filling the homes of citizens, beyond that there must be something to explain the existence of the Companions. Without the nigh-apocalyptic quantity of ursine home invaders, the work of the Companions would be minimal, barely enough to support the rent on their mead hall, let alone the indulgent spending on their lycanthropy habits and ostentatious forge that dominates a quarter of their home city<sup>16</sup>. If the bears desist, then the fiction stumbles to explain the Companions. While the snow bear attempts to invoke adverse possession rights en masse is an especially ludicrous example, all Radiant quests possess this quality of existing for the sake of being done to some degree. They need not be done, and instead are manufactured tasks, artificially created to ensure that the player is both occupied and distracted enough to be immersed in the fiction of the world (Graeber 2019).

In truth, it is not solely the player whose role in the Radiant Quest is an exercise in redundancy. The quest-giver, often an NPC known to the player through prior interactions often with more detail (Tolfdir is met through the Mage College, Aela the Huntress who gives the “Animal Extermination” quest is met on the road from the first town to the first city players are likely to be directed to via the main quest), is coerced by the Radiant AI into equally menial and meaningless labour. Tolfdir and Aela hold positions of some acclaim and authority despite their role in the narrative as ancillary characters. Yet they proffer to the player a pointless task in the guise of a quest – as a cat would offer the corpse of some vermin to their owner, suffused with pride at their hunting prowess despite their quarry likely being barely identifiable as an animal. Made into taskmasters and box-tickers, Aela, Tolfdir, and their digital kin fashioned with buttons and wires into the image of sentience possess elements of both in their role as dutiful NPCs. The terms Taskmaster and Box-Ticker come from the anthropologist David Graeber;

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<sup>14</sup> This is of importance as it comes up throughout the main quest of the College of Winterhold faction. In addition, one of the locations for his alembic to appear can be one of the few rooms in which he spends most of his day. The author ventures that while forgetfulness is a devilish difficulty to experience, there is a limit, especially when one has the ability to freeze someone to death with a wrong word.

<sup>15</sup> The warrior faction of the game – swords for hire with an honour code.

<sup>16</sup> A comparison may be the banking sector; David Graeber has asserted in the past through research and testimony of involved parties that many involved in that area have jobs which could be expedited by two lines of code (Graeber 2019).

categories of meaningless jobs that he refers to as bullshit jobs<sup>17</sup>. A Taskmaster creates the work that need not be done (see the section above on "Tolfdir the Absent-Minded" for the average necessity of a Radiant AI quest) and a Box-Ticker ensures that unnecessary tasks are recorded for the sake of aesthetics (and in this case, the immersion the game seeks to establish). In fact, the Radiant Quest-Giver is perhaps another category of bullshit job to be added to the list Graeber penned in his 2018 rally against meaningless work, *Bullshit Jobs* (Graeber 2019). A Radiant quest-giver takes the core nature of the taskmaster as a dealer in deeds demanded that need not be done but adds a flavouring of sycophancy along with the deliverance of a negligible reward. Non-radiant quests offer valuable items, large sums of gold, or access to useful services. Harken to the call of Aela, and you shall instead receive little more than patronisation and perhaps sufficient coin to pay for the replenishment of supplies expended in the last fruitless endeavour. A Radiant quest rewards you with naught but the next quest and the means to undertake it, ad infinitum. No progress, no change, only repetition. The gratitude of the quest-giver is hollow too, as these are the same words spoken. Vex, the thief who gives the quest "The Burglary Job", will utter the same phrase in congratulations after each item is stolen, and confer the same financial reward onto the player (dependent on player level). The thanks are not genuine, just formality, the last line of the quest script enabling the next one to be chosen and moved forward with. Mechanically the thanks are functioning as a flag the game uses to indicate that the player has done the previous quest and is now able to take the quest again should they choose. Every Radiant quest-giver works as a means to encourage the player to perform a quest then do another, ensuring there is an infinite loop of gameplay. All to ensure that the world appears infinitely full of people whose purposes, wants, and needs still persist beyond the central narrative and the player.

If Radiant AI does this, and does so with undeniable transparency, the next logical step is to ask why engagement with the quests continues unabated. They are deeds without purpose - when the player completes a radiant quest, all that happens is a replacement quest appears - apart from a negligible amount of gold and experience. If neither mechanical bonuses nor narrative bonuses are enticing enough (too little and non-existent respectively<sup>18</sup>), all that remains is the opportunity for participation in the game to explain why players engage with Radiant AI-powered quests. The game places value on participation, the mere act of spending time on the game having inherent worth in the form of what is ostensibly enjoyment, but in truth is a pretence of it wherein the player is either fooled or willingly fools themselves into thinking what they do is worthwhile (Williams 2021). The sycophantic tendencies of the quest-givers are essential here as players need to be coerced into the next radiant quest, as it is indubitably just busywork sold for a handful of imagined coins and pleasantries. Encouraged to go forth and complete a usually simple objective, the player does so, in pursuit not of any virtue – in fact, many of the tasks a radiant quest will demand of them proclaim their mischievous or explicitly sinful nature – but of the basest form of emotion associated with hedonic pursuits, enjoyment. Perhaps on occasion, the hedonism is delayed, the petty gold or magic item received as reward for the quest transmuted into the means to access pleasure, a balm to soothe the pains of the labour the player undertook to receive their reward (Fisher 2022 [2014]). A player enthusiastic about magic, for example, may buy a new spell with their reward

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<sup>17</sup> This follows on from the study of bullshit as a philosophical concept by Harry Frankfurt, in his essay *On Bullshit*. (Frankfurt 2005)

<sup>18</sup> The one exception is the Thieves Guild – complete 50 of the radiant quests, and the guild headquarters look mildly nicer and less like the dilapidated empty sewer cistern they are situated in. Nothing else occurs beyond that – and completing 50 odd jobs for such a minor reward is too much repetition for the average player, or at least for the author.

of 300 gold for killing the incognito *Ursus Arctos* suddenly to be found in its natural habitat of a living room. The satisfaction has dual purpose like the Radiant quest itself. First is its primary function as the motivation to the player for their completion of the quest, but secondarily it fills the role of distraction. Distraction of this nature serves to induce passivity and provide a shield for the designers of the game; the quests are banal and rife with flaws on a narrative and mechanical level, yet the reward is often slightly less so. Just exciting or valuable enough (though still paling in comparison to the main rewards and even more so when compared to those which a dedicated player can engineer through playing the game and combining mechanics to a ridiculous level) to obscure the banality and flawed game in which they are placed, the rewards of these quests - either in-game or out of game in the form of more game to play - disguise the fact that what a player is doing is repetitive and in many cases redundant. It plays on a desire for more and generates a form of passivity that is rooted in the pursuit of more. Chasing the glut of content that Radiant quests can provide, players lose sight of what the Radiant quests are (Williams 2021). Thus, subsumed by hedonism gleaned from an experience devoid of nuance, the player is blind to the Radiant AI and what it is doing.

The mind of the player is subtly reoriented, as the Radiant Quests encourage them to perform them – the goal is to snare the erstwhile completionist, or the casual player seeking a quick thrill. Randomly generated, these quests are as vestigial limbs on a snake – without purpose or use to the player – and possess equal ability to move anything forward. They are still part of the body, and the blood that bore the fruit of the main quest and the central narrative flows in their veins, but they are ineffectual and frequently out of place. None emerge unscathed from their presence. A quest-giver is boiled down and simplified, reduced to a mouth that speaks its needs and thanks, and a hand that provides rewards. Players, too, are thereby changed into pawns, a mix between tool and game piece; their purpose is to serve the game world without truly impacting it in the way the central narrative or a written quest crafted by a mortal mind of humankind could allow them to do (Fisher 2022 [2014]). And indeed, they are prompted to '[call] to mind another resource...which melted sorrow and sweetened gall' (Homer 2004)<sup>19</sup>, the sweet *nēpenthes phārmakon* that relieves the mind of troublesome truths substituted for the ever-repeating cycle of request-labour-reward-request, distracting from rather than resolving the issues that beset the playing experience. The game is flawed on a fundamental level, and though the player knows it, they embrace the Radiant AI with open arms, for it can offer just enough reward to fuel illusions of progress provided the player both enjoys their participation on the game and wishes to continue playing (Williams 2021). True, those rewards offered, the writing and design, everything except the mere fact of their presence falls short. The *nepenthe*, sublime and insidious, carries the player onward - their time in the game, chasing the cheapest thrill and swiftest gratification, is directing them through both the mechanical and narrative rewards offered - deeper into the pointless cycle. *Ouroboros* chasing its own tail, knowing the satisfaction of the catch may not fully eclipse the pain of the bite, still feeds its rear into its maw because it is close and familiar; the pain and the pleasure are both expected, and both already known. That the nourishment or enrichment granted are in some cases demeaning or even fruitless matters not. What matters is the participation since that, itself, provides joy. Moreover, this act of participation in the game as its own reward is a slowing (but crucially, not quite stilling) of the pulse, as the mind dulls with its repetitive acts and *nepenthe*, sweet, baleful *nepenthe*, drinks its fill of the player as they drink deeply of its enchantment. No more an active player, they passively engage, watching as they put in the least efforts into the actions of their character. May-haps this state is the goal of the Radiant AI? Passivity breeds acceptance, and alongside being merely accepting, the player is even forgiving and excusing the false steps the

<sup>19</sup> *The Odyssey*, Book 4, line 219-221.



game makes, all in the name of progress perceived by the fooled senses of the player (Fisher 2022 [2014]). The hunger of the ouroboros, gnawing at its own vestigial limbs and tail for sustenance, is insatiable, as the pain of the fangs instils fervour to keep eating to distract from it. Behold, the burden of the quest-giver, imparted freely and all too easily taken upon the shoulder to be subsequently shed and hoisted aloft again.

## 2 Honest Pay for Honest Work

This shifting of this burden of duty and completion ties in neatly to several overarching concerns regarding both technology and AI in particular, namely the matter of purpose in design. Purpose is the driving force of development for that which is built, and ever-present when any technology is being manufactured (Williams 2021). Far from being restricted to AI, artificial intelligences are merely the newest progeny of ideological manufacturing. The means by which ideology and desire shape design are most evident in the more mundane aspects of life. Sleep, for example, is one area of life over which the individual is sovereign. Work demands the submission to superiors and their demands, and study requires the adherence to the footsteps of the previous architects of academia looming over you from the past. But in sleep, once our conscious minds surrender the reins of control, the ghosts of the past and shackles of the present slip away. Plato, Freud, and Galen may haunt the fields of philosophy, psychology, and medicine respectively, but the endless dreamy hills of restful sleep are not beholden to the whims of the dead as academia is; they are the preserve of the living mind. However, the era in which we live is not one suited for wallowing in slumber, as the majority of jobs work from the early hours of the morning until the steady crawl of the sun back under the horizon. Therefore, there is a need to wake up early; purely as a result of the need by many to be awake earlier than they would like to be, so as to attend work to make enough money to live and sleep without fear of starvation or becoming unhoused. Thus, there is the flood of alarm apps, designed ostensibly for productivity. This is a nebulous concept, one which could then be translated into others such as control of the life of the worker for profit<sup>20</sup>, with constraint and restriction in one area (namely, rest) in return for greater expenditure of time and energy in another (likely the workplace). One such application, Alarmy, is especially egregious in this way as it is archetypical of this style of software - its activation usurps control of your mobile device until the alarm, which gradually increases in volume, vibrating your phone, and then requiring the completion of a task for the alarm to be deactivated - with the core tenet of the software being consent from the user and an assumed desire for the increase of productivity via the restriction of the time spent asleep (Fisher 2022 [2014]). Moreover, the application takes this consent and extrapolates outward from it - advertisements beset the user, both from the developers and the companies who buy space on the screen of the application for their own marketing materials. However, the advertisements from the developer include attempts to sell premium features of the application gated behind a monthly subscription, all with the tagline "never snooze again". Much as how the Radiant AI acts with the implicit purpose of keeping the player of *Skyrim* playing *Skyrim* without effort on the part of the developer, Alarmy was designed with the implicit purpose of restricting leisure time and having that time then dedicated to productivity, the ethos and derivation of work.

It appears then, that in spaces where the individual would be perceived as sovereign over their time, a degree of control is exercised upon them by their world. The designers of the game

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<sup>20</sup> This is not the only possible means by which we can interpret productivity as an ethos, but one way in which the term is used. A productivity measure is rarely one which aims to improve conditions for workers, and more often introduced to improve efficiency and profits at the cost of the worker.

*Skyrim* likely mean no harm through the building of an Artificial Intelligence to write aspects of their game for them, being wholly engrossed in the construction of an overarching narrative and the mechanical elements which underpin it; they merely desire that you continue to play. Quite contrary to the goal of Alarmy, namely the restriction of leisure time all for the name of productivity, the designers of *Skyrim* encourage the leisure time of the player to blossom into a behemoth around which other aspects of their lives orbit. At the very least, they encourage the expenditure of time in the game – this is a handy means to sell merchandise and extra content for *Skyrim*, such as DLC or perhaps another special edition of the game sold at a retail price<sup>21</sup> – much as the addict is prompted to have another hit after the thrill of the first, so too is the player encouraged to keep playing after the main quest is complete (Nguyen 2020). Games such as *Skyrim* oftentimes have a large degree of what may be generously called clean-up work following (or just preceding) their endgame, wherein the player finishes off any as-yet incomplete quests not neatly tied up in a bow by the main narrative<sup>22</sup> to empty their to-do list the game gives them. This often involves small tasks, as each one appears as a new objective, and rare indeed are times when the player lacks at least one quest driving them forth. Radiant quests will likely be among those left to complete – but as you well know by now, dear reader, a radiant quest is never completed and is only ever begun anew. The game says to players that although the great evil is vanquished, there is still more to do, so they must continue to play. Such imperatives are plentiful outside of games, but always do they have the motivation of interaction with whatever provides them as at least part of the purpose for delivering them. Alarmy, for example, encourages routine, and will warn you that alarms may not trigger if you do not grant it the permission to take control of your device from you. It even now goes to the length where, should you fail to wake in a morning, it gives the option to take money from you. Its purpose is not to ensure you get up, just as *Skyrim* does not have the purpose of making you enjoy yourself. Those purposes are for alarms and games respectively – the purpose of both is to ensure that you wake up or enjoy yourself with them. Radiant quests, or any mundane activity which has a new task as its primary reward, keep you in motion and engaging, in order to encourage the same passivity that dulls the senses (Fisher 2022 [2014]). After a few quests for the Thieves Guild, you may find it hard to recall why you still do them or why you started. A few days with Alarmy, and you may just incorporate it into your routine and summarily forget why it was ever downloaded. In both cases, you are distracted from or become willing to ignore the fact that the real reason for your engagement and interaction with any of this is the profit of others, be it the sale of goods to you, or you to be sold as the product itself. An unfulfilling experience is only natural – the goal for which you reach is different than the one the system is seeking – when you wish to play to enjoy yourself, but the Radiant quests want you to play so that you remain engaged with the game and continue playing it.

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<sup>21</sup> Glance at the Wikipedia entry for *Skyrim* and you can see at least five re-releases following its first. Including, hilariously, both a “Legendary Edition” in 2013 and a “Special Edition” in 2016. No major changes can be recorded between the two for most players – the main differences being graphical fidelity and price.

<sup>22</sup> This can, on occasion, prove anticlimactic – the final act many players perform is not the slaying of a mighty dragon or the ending of an intercontinental war, but rather the returning of a completely mundane item to an individual whose name you have long since forgotten. There is something poetic to this too, a return to the humble origins your hero had, only to realise that no longer is a hero like you needed as the world-ending threats have been ended themselves, and that nothing more of note on the world scale may be done – where true value lies is in mundane and everyday acts of kindness. However, this is overshadowed by this being more often than not due to the less interesting quests being less engaging and therefore never completed.

### 3 The Worst Chess Game Nobody Played

In the same vein of engagement being prioritized, let us take a short sojourn from *Skyrim* and Alarmy and glance towards something different that may illustrate the issue of crossed purposes resulting in disappointing results, much like the Radiant AI quests and NPCs. Stockfish is a chess AI – it is designed to play chess and nothing beyond playing the game and the niceties involved therein. Its purpose and functionality are one and the same. Stockfish is a free and open-source software<sup>23</sup> which plays chess, nothing else. It is quite good at it, too, possessing an Elo rating of roughly 3632<sup>24</sup>; likely due to it being developed over the course of 15 years<sup>25</sup> by numerous dedicated individuals. It, like any other chess engine, analyses the board and the position of the pieces, before offering the move most likely to lead to a win. Observant readers will note how this method is similar to how Radiant throws together locations and enemies to craft quests for the player to complete. Unlike Radiant, however, the scope of a chess game is much narrower; one may only perform a certain number of moves in any specific situation, and each move necessarily invites another until the definitive fall of one king at the hand of a player. The similarities end however, when our gaze falls onto the problem of depth, for Stockfish swims into the deeper waters of nuance with each consecutive move. It knows (insofar as an Artificial Intelligence can know anything) which moves are most suitable to build a successful game of suitable challenge for a player, as its purpose is, as hitherto mentioned, to play chess well (Whittlestone 2021). Radiant does not have that purpose, instead its core functionality enables it to fulfil its true role; namely, keeping players playing the game and using Radiant. Stockfish is not designed to keep you playing. It is designed to play. Enter ChatGPT. Much like Radiant and Stockfish, ChatGPT is designed to simulate intelligence through the assemblage and application of data<sup>26</sup>. Radiant places game locations, entities, and objects into templates, Stockfish chooses moves within the confines of a chess game to seek the best route to victory, but ChatGPT is more generic. It has no specific template – rather, it will generate conversation based upon a prompt offered by a user, choosing the most likely response based on whatever data it has been given prior – and can hypothetically emulate whatever a human can do, much like how Radiant tries to replicate the work of writers and designers. However, it meets the same roadblock in that it can generate content, but cannot give that content depth, only regurgitate data points it has assimilated. This does not prevent the owner of the software, OpenAI, from charging users \$20 for its most advanced version on a monthly basis. Its purpose, then, is clear – it exists not to make content, nor to advance artificial intelligence. Its function is to earn \$20 each month, from each premium user, and to do so, conversations with it have the purpose of keeping you conversing. ChatGPT hungers for data, and each conversation makes it more adept as it absorbs that which you say to it. The more it is fed, the more it grows,

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<sup>23</sup> This term, in software, are often shortened to FOSS. A free software is distributed with no financial costs to acquire it on the part of the recipient. An open-source software is one which is able to be edited and added to by users as part of its distribution. Not all free software is open source, but all open-source software is free.

<sup>24</sup> This is one of the methods of numerically calculating the skill one has in chess, devised by Arpad Elo (hence the name). Under most readings, the score Stockfish achieves would mark it as an immensely skilled player.

<sup>25</sup> At time of writing, the last stable version was released on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2024. Technically, Stockfish is 17 years old – it was originally a derivative of a program called Glaurung (another chess engine), which released in 2004, and was discontinued in 2008, one month after Stockfish originally released.

<sup>26</sup> Rather than true Artificial Intelligence, we instead have Generative A.I. – rather than creating ideas from scratch, Generative A.I.s just reconstitute the data points previously fed to them. The more data, the more variance in responses, but it never makes anything itself. It is less the Borg from Star Trek, more like the infinite monkeys trying to write Shakespeare after drinking infinite banana daquiris during Happy Hour at the local bar.

and each month you pay for the privilege to be both consumer and product. Unlike Stockfish, which is built to play, ChatGPT is built to keep you playing, by whatever means necessary.

Nowhere is this more apparent than when Stockfish and ChatGPT faced off against each other. In February of 2023, one of the more ridiculous games<sup>27</sup> of chess, between the two artificial intelligences, was recorded. The difference is stark – Stockfish, expectedly, wins the game<sup>28</sup> – but the absurdity descends to such levels that outline the sheer gulf between our erstwhile competitors. The original post on Reddit (megamaz\_ 2022) outlining this match contains a visual representation of the game, wherein we see ChatGPT invent new rules for the game, transform its pieces to others, reclaim pieces taken or simply convert the white pieces (controlled by Stockfish) to black ones<sup>29</sup>. That Stockfish wins is remarkable given the blatant violation and disregard for the rules that ChatGPT displays, especially when Stockfish adheres to those same rules rigidly. However, one could argue that ChatGPT is not knowingly breaking these rules – it has been fed enough data to have acquired some knowledge of chess, which is sufficient to know the basics, but deeply inadequate when trying to employ them – ChatGPT knows of chess through osmosis but its picture lacks both context and depth. The transcript of this chess match provides further illumination, highlighting this ignorance and the way the A.I. is trying to encourage users to engage with it. Guidance is constantly needed to enable ChatGPT to play the game – it needs to be told how to play with coordinate notation, and later needs to be told that Stockfish wins as it cannot recognise victory conditions itself; it falsely calls checkmate halfway through the game, and has to be told not to take its own king, which would end the game (Guest 2022). When it does finally lose, it does so via moving its king diagonal to a pawn, to be taken on the following move Stockfish makes. The primary issue with this game is, as hitherto explained, a lack of knowledge of the game and its rules; where Stockfish knows the best move to make, adding nuance to each game, ChatGPT takes the approach of a random number generator, making not the best move, but the most believable one. This is due to the purpose of the A.I. – the game is ridiculous not because ChatGPT is bad at chess, but because it has no need to be good. After each misstep, ChatGPT needs to be guided. Stockfish manages on its own and submits its moves as simple co-ordinates. Moreover, ChatGPT couches every move within small talk, and is evidently trying to conduct a conversation. Should we recall that ChatGPT exists to mine data through interaction and funnel engaged users into the premium version trained on their own efforts, we can imagine a reason behind its incompetence (Williams 2021). Specifically, a skilled opponent needs no interaction beyond the game, but a learner automatically requires more interaction. Stockfish is playing primarily to play chess and win and does so handily. But by playing, ChatGPT has already won, and the margin of its victory is based on the length of the game; hence its refrain, ‘would you like to play another game?’ (Guest 2022), an urging to continue the interaction, to keep talking. Your words as a user translate directly to profit for OpenAI through the refinement of their idiot child into a savant. Much like Radiant, the goal is not your fulfilment, but your engagement.

In truth, Radiant quests exist as a privation of fulfilment – it contains all base parts of a quest bar human intervention and the ability to impact the world with your actions (Nguyen 2020). The player is ensorcelled into a false enjoyment where all the signs point toward something worthwhile, when in actuality, no such difference is made. This core principle of performing

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<sup>27</sup> Chess is not immune to absurdity. Recent scandals such as the accusations of cheating via anally inserted sexual stimulation aids (Ingle 2022) not been particularly sensible considering the reputation of the game.

<sup>28</sup> In truth, it may be that nobody won.

<sup>29</sup> One black pawn resides in F6 despite being taken several times, never moving. Each time it is taken, ChatGPT replaces it, acting as if nothing happened. This is – if it were not already apparent – unusual.

an action to continue performing it is one which is part of what we may call the maintenance of the current world-state. Apps, software, tasks – all things which possess such a purpose serve to keep things as they are and avoid any change beyond that which has negligible effect beyond the individual. It matters precious little to the legislator or employer with how much verve you live your life and pursue your dreams, provided that whatever joy you glean is not disruptive to wider systems. Alarmy exists ostensibly to make you more productive, but implicitly to train you into a habit of waking up for work, because to be late is correlated with being ineffectual as a worker and would disrupt the greater sphere of work. Imagine, if you would, a world wherein people could sleep in until nine in the morning free of concerns about reprimand from their employer. The need for businesses to open later would be an obvious consequence of this new world-state, but so too would the average amount of sleep most individuals could have. Trading in productivity for restfulness seems like a natural deal, but to do so would alter the world-state and necessitate legislation alongside restructuring of the way in which corporate constructs such as private sector employment function. Therefore, there are processes in place which enforce the maintenance of the present state of affairs (Fisher 2022 [2014]). Change, in the wider sphere, is glacial, due in no small part to those who benefit from it being the ones who are in a position to effect such changes. Radiant quests are a microcosm of this maintenance of the world-state. The fact remains, a videogame world is inert when compared to a real space – it can only be altered within acceptable parameters for the game – and this is the primary reason for the mundanity of the Radiant quest. One cannot, when playing *Skyrim*, become the ruler of the province by systematically committing several dozen counts of murder, as the central narrative cannot withstand such an anarchic swerve into madness. The developers know this, conferring conditional immortality upon certain NPCs that ends only when their role in the quest they are part of is concluded<sup>30</sup>. Not all NPCs are essential, simply those of importance whose death would change the course of the world within the narrative bounds defined by the developers. Notably, outside of the Radiant quest givers, few if any NPCs involved in Radiant quests are essential. It matters not if they perish, because the Radiant quest is by design unable to affect the world, and nor can its participants. The world-state cannot be challenged, and thus all things in it exist with the goal of its maintenance, averse to change as a threat to the prevailing status quo (Graeber 2019).

Recall our harsh refrain, that the purpose of the Radiant quest is not to play but to keep you playing, and one could easily imagine such a statement transcending the game – who has not experienced the feeling of being rewarded with the completion of a task by having a new duty assigned to them? The Radiant quest is not an experience unique to *Skyrim*, and one no doubt familiar to those who toil in industries with more Sisyphean work routines. The same task, again and again, borne on wings of red tape to land on the desk of the worker, with no end in sight until the heat death of the universe; or failing that, the decision to change professions stops being a choice and becomes a necessity (Graeber 2019). Radiant quests, and all tasks of their ilk which share the same harrowingly shallow template, are a symptom of a system wherein change is actively discouraged. Some might call it busywork, but unlike the radiant quests themselves, there is a quantity of nuance that term fails to capture. Mere busywork casts few aspersions and has often no reward – one may only reorganise stationery cupboards so often before realising that the task is purposeless and will thus result in nothing gained – but a Radiant quest buoys you along with the promise of remuneration for your effort and relies on the idea of the task being one of import. But it is no less manufactured, often more so than the average

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<sup>30</sup> These NPCs are called essential NPCs by the game, as they are considered essential for the progression of key story quests. Ironically, some NPCs are essential up until the point that the player is intended to kill them, and the same protections the developers afforded them doom them.

instance of make-work. Tolfdir needs his alembic fetched just as much as Aela needs the bear hunted, and both need these tasks done for the same reason. If they were not presented to the player, they would be without purpose, as their capacity to change the world is precisely nil. However, this is because of their position – they are snared in the trappings of *Skyrim*, a world which is encoded to be a certain way. We are not. Though the engineering of society to enable all in it to have a discernible effect seems akin to an insurmountable task, there is more than enough leeway here to allow for change (Fisher 2022 [2014]). Provided there is a continual effort to shape our world-state into a better one, we may do more than mere maintenance upon it. Tasks such as Radiant quests are designed to occupy individuals and restrain them, maintaining the state of affairs as it is and thereby preventing those same individuals from accessing opportunities to change their lives and their world. Unlike in *Skyrim*, the real world lacks a main narrative carefully demarcated as being of importance, but we can often realise that some work is essentially an exercise in impotence. One may photocopy a document thrice for slightly above the hourly minimum wage of their country, but fulfilment does not frequently stem from forms copied in triplicate. Work of similar nature to Radiant quests – without the hope of progress beyond some small financial remuneration and the prior task you completed awarded to you anew – is abundant (Graeber 2019). So much of work exists for the sake of existing, rather than for the reason of contributing to something else; to avoid malaise of the kind that afflicts the player of *Skyrim* amidst the deluge of meaningless duties handed to the hero of the province, it needs to be reduced.

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