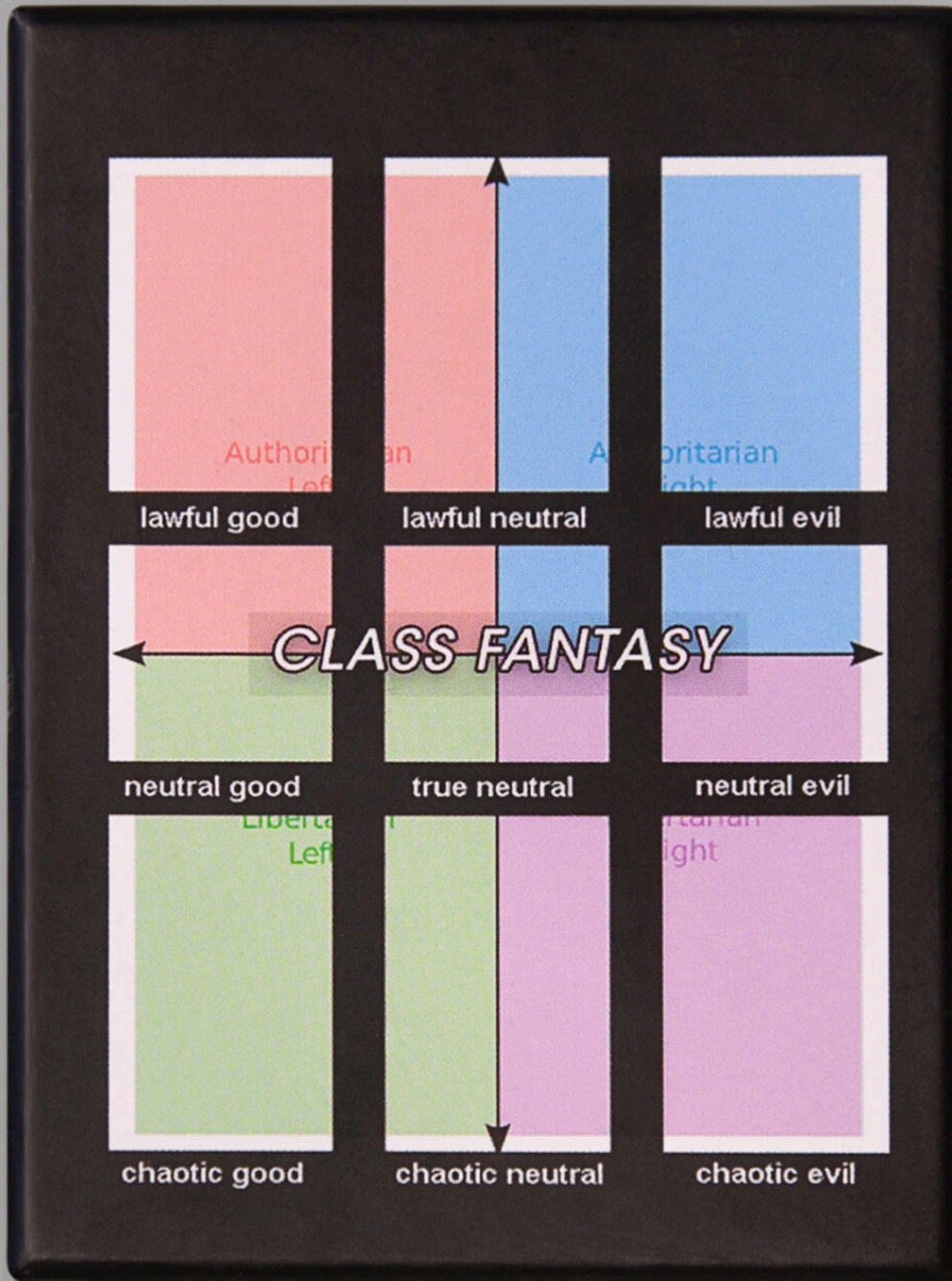


INTERVIEW ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/FORMAT/INTERVIEW/](https://bombmagazine.org/format/interview/))

Joshua Citarella by Louis Bury

Finding alternative ways of supporting an artistic practice.

JULY 8, 2024



Joshua Citarella, *Class Fantasy*, 2024, game box, role-playing game. Courtesy of the artist.

Artist Joshua Citarella rose to prominence making lens-based work as part of the early 2010s post-internet movement. Today, he continues to exhibit in galleries and museums, but his practice also takes nontraditional forms. He produces a podcast and writes a newsletter that examines online political subcultures. He streams on Twitch and recently designed a card game, *Class Fantasy* (<https://joshuacitarella.metalabel.com/class-fantasy>), inspired by the overlaps between role-playing games (RPG) and politics. His *Do Not Research* Discord channel serves as a hub for lively community exchanges about related topics.

Citarella's pivot to content creation is more than just a way to monetize his practice; it is also a class-conscious effort to build alternative art institutions. He and I met at Dunkunsthalles, an artist-run project space founded by Rachel Rossin that operates out of a former Dunkin' Donuts in New York City's Financial District. The Whitney Biennial and Venice Biennale may be running concurrently right now, but the kinds of smart, scrappy spaces that Citarella and his peers are building are no less important bellwethers.

Louis Bury

Can you talk about the alternative financial structures, such as subscription content and cooperative profit sharing, you've used for your practice?

Joshua Citarella

My instinct is that new, twenty-first-century structures will become increasingly common among those who need to make a living from their creative pursuits. More and more content is being disintermediated and uploaded directly to platforms. The biggest burden on US artists has always been rent and material overhead, so as the cost of living has increased, the old forms of patronage have become insufficient. I want to find ways for weird creative projects to exist despite increasingly adversarial circumstances.

LB

The artists who can afford to make work under those conditions already have a financial safety net.

JC

I've been able to monetize my own practice in part because I was an early adopter of social media. But there are other ways to organize creative life in society. There are countries, even capitalist ones, such as Norway, where people get paid by the government to write poetry, for example. Some people who work in US arts institutions are afraid to speak out about their austere conditions, but that's like waiting for a promotion to assistant captain on the Titanic. When I became untethered from that financial system, I realized there was nothing for me to lose by speaking out.

LB

What do you envision as potential ways forward?

JC

I want to build a crowdfunded arts organization, which hasn't really been done before. I can also imagine structures that resemble galleries, but without overhead and that pay royalties to artists. The Web3 people got a lot wrong, but one thing they got right was payment splits and royalties

built into how they sell work. A contract provision for artist royalties with each resale, as well as galleries guaranteeing a price floor the first time the painting gets sold, would reduce retail prices and prevent flipping.

LB

To create more equitable structures you have to become a businessperson, of a sort.

JC

Yes! The market-socialist cooperative model requires that the bosses become more like the workers but also that the workers become more like the bosses. It requires everyone to become somewhat financially literate because they're now joint stockholders in a cooperative entity. It's an uncomfortable conversation to have with people on the left. In a perfect world, I'd prefer to write long essays and books and make big pictures; however, given realistic constraints, it's necessary to carve that longer work up into shorter content, such as episodic Substack posts. The current gallery alternative is to squeeze all your ideas into a painting because painting does the least bad commercially among fine-arts media, but that forces a lot of ideas into the wrong box.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Joshua-Citarella-Class-Fantasy-2.jpg)

Joshua Citarella, *Class Fantasy*, 2024, Techno-Feudalism card, role-playing game. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

One box you use is Twitch streams. What's your gaming background, and how does it inform your new card game, *Class Fantasy*?

JC

In college, I was a competitive *World of Warcraft* player and found especially compelling the character-selection screen before you even start the game. That choice resembles the way young people LARP different ideologies on Instagram, as if playtesting them. The key artistic element of *Class Fantasy* is less its visual identity and more how it maps the *Dungeons and Dragons* character-alignment grid onto the political compass. I also went deep on the calculations for the character

abilities, which took me almost a year to complete. Similar to real-world politics, you can form alliances with other characters, but you can also betray those alliances to gain strategic advantages.

LB

How would you describe your own politics?

JC

Socialist in the sheets, social democratic in the streets. I come from a left background, but I want to build a broad coalition that can achieve social democracy. Theorizing about “real socialism” is basically role-playing if institutions such as a national health service don’t already exist.

“The difficulty of doing politics in a democracy is that you have to talk to people who don’t share the same ideological framework as you.”

— Joshua Citarella

LB

A lot of your projects put you in conversation with people whose beliefs differ from yours. It feels anthropological in a good way.

JC

The difficulty of doing politics in a democracy is that you have to talk to people who don’t share the same ideological framework as you. In recent years, the journalist class tends to dismiss people who have “the wrong ideas.” I don’t think that helps to build the broad coalition needed for meaningful economic reform in the US. I want to engage people whose ideas might sometimes be considered offensive or reprehensible and try to get at their core concerns. We need them to do things like vote and participate in strikes.

LB

How does the online-specific nature of your research factor into this?

JC

The kind of conversations you can have in IRL spaces is different because of the scale at which social media operates. Online, any participant can derail a thread, and the incentives tend toward polarization. A while back, I wrote an essay about how shitposting doesn’t scale; on open social media, the risk for harm is different than in a small-group context. On the other hand, I don’t think we should assume the current social-media structure will continue in perpetuity. The introduction of paywalls, as well as a flood of AI content, will drive people toward more enclosed, gatekept spaces.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Joshua-Citarella-Class-Fantasy-3.jpg)

Joshua Citarella, *Class Fantasy*, 2024, tabletop gameplay, role-playing game. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

What can art do in terms of reaching both mainstream and niche audiences?

JC

I see art as the quintessential example of what economist Mariana Mazzucato calls “spillover value,” in which one sector of the economy creates value that is then recorded in other sectors. When an art scene contributes to higher rents, it’s the art that creates the initial value, but it gets captured by the landlords. Mazzucato’s prescription is for governments, cultural institutions, and participants to make the proper investments and subsidies in the sectors that actually create value.

LB

Spillover value is a powerful way to understand financial speculation among the collector class.

JC

Art writing is a classic example of spillover value too.

LB

For sure. And the spaces available for certain kinds of art writing have shrunk in the past ten or fifteen years. Reviews, for example, don't drive web traffic.

JC

In every creative sphere, there's an order-of-magnitude difference in monetization for certain content, like a music album that's carried by one hit song. It's such an overwhelming power law that it alters how we produce culture. For the moment, it still makes financial sense for most students to pursue college degrees in terms of earning potential across their lifespan. But that may not be the case in five or ten years if certain labor trends continue.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Joshua-Citarella-e-deologies-4.jpg)

Joshua Citarella, *e-deologies*, 2024, pigment print on canvas, each 60 × 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

Your article in the *Dark Forest Anthology of the Internet*, "We Need New Platforms to Tell New Stories," is instructive in this regard. It recounts your pivot from teaching part-time in well-regarded arts colleges to becoming a content creator covering the same curriculum.

JC

Before the pandemic, I led an independent study with a phenomenal student. From our conversations, it became clear that her most meaningful learning wasn't happening in her classes but in the left-wing podcasts she listened to. That's a crisis for the value of higher education. I want

the institutions I'm building to be well-positioned for when that crisis affects perceptions of higher education's legitimacy.

LB

Can you talk about your experiments with exercise and male improvement?

JC

This is an ongoing strain of my work, even though it's more of a side project. I got into weightlifting because people with conservative belief systems often claim that once you start working out your alignment with left-wing politics will change.

LB

It didn't make you a rugged individualist?

JC

It didn't change anything about my political beliefs! I wrote a piece called "Auto Experiment: Hypermasculinity" and did all of their programs: lifted weights, ate raw eggs, even sunned my balls. There's a clear connection between good nutritional advice and general well-being, but the political parts are total nonsense. There are young men on the internet willing to listen to me because I'm a white man who lifts weights and says what he thinks. They may be predisposed toward right-wing politics, but they're at least willing to listen to me. Some even change their worldview as a result. I see that as proof of the process.

Class Fantasy is available [here \(https://joshuacitarella.metalabel.com/class-fantasy\)](https://joshuacitarella.metalabel.com/class-fantasy).

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