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Abstract

Traditionally, theories of play and games have drawn a clear distinction between two different forms of activity; play and labour. Over the last two decades, the concept of *playbour* has challenged this division, with empirical studies and observations showing the intertwining of play and labour. This article offers an analysis of playbour through different perspectives of Critical Theory and explores its theoretical implications. The novel concept of reified gameplay is presented to understand the alienating tendencies of playbour, using the games *EVE Online* and *CryptoKitties* as key examples. Reified gameplay is a form of gameplay action shaped by processes of reification and rationalisation within and as part of the culture industry.

Keywords

Reified gameplay; playbour; reification; critical theory; culture industry

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The relationship between play and labour has been widely discussed, particularly in the last two decades since the introduction of the concept of *playbour* (Kücklich, 2005). In the original article written by Julian Kücklich, the concept was introduced in the context of modding culture, a theme which has been researched further (Sotamaa, 2007). Other practical and empirical applications have been made in other contexts, such as gold farming (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Goggin, 2011), the broadcasting and making of videos on platforms such as Twitch or YouTube (Törhönen et al., 2019), and even social media (Fuchs, 2016).

This article explores the impact of economic imperatives on gameplay in the video game industry, specifically examining the blurring of the line between play and labour. It aims to answer the question of how this blurring affects the nature of play itself. It has been suggested that the nature of play and labour are changing due to the processes of their intertwining (Yee, 2006). Yee (2006) makes the societally important observation that people often perform tasks in online video games similar to the ones they perform in their actual occupation, while describing their gaming

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experience as almost like a second job. However, no thorough theoretical analysis of what this means for play itself has been conducted.

Previously, Schultzke (2014) has researched the intertwining of play and labour within the virtual worlds produced by the culture industry. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2015) have shown the alienation that occurs as a consequence of this intertwining. This article builds upon and expands this previous work by analysing these processes with the concept of reification. Schultzke's (2014) analysis uses the example of MMO games and the commodification of play. I expand and deepen this analysis with the concept of reification, which enables a deeper examination of the phenomenon of alienation.

Reification is a form of alienation, in which social relations take a commodity form, to the point it becomes a society-defining category (Lukács, 1971). As such, it is a process that affects practical action, player agency and the social relations between players. It provides a theoretical link between structure and agency (Feenberg, 2015), which is essential, because agency is what makes games special as a form of art and entertainment (Nguyen, 2020). Commodification fails to capture all these aspects. Commodification happens in a more concrete sense, whereas reification pertains to the idea of living, vivid processes becoming static, schematic and repetitive. Reification typically involves the process of rationalisation as well, which is why that concept is also included in the discussion. Additionally, I suggest that the phenomenon of reified gameplay is not limited to the MMO-genre and propose additional games for analysis.

Methodologically, the article provides a philosophical analysis of its themes within the framework of Critical Theory. This means that philosophical analysis and critique needs to be empirically and socially informed, with a clear connection between theory and praxis. Critical Theory endorses multidisciplinary approaches to the study of social phenomena. These ideals were first presented by Max Horkheimer in his 1937 essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (Horkheimer, 2002), and have been reformulated later by Habermas (1990). For Habermas, the role of philosophy among the sciences is to function as a stand-in and interpreter. This means interpreting and drawing wider, theoretical conclusions from the results of empirical sciences.

This article is divided into four sections. The first introduces the basic concepts, and their relations to each other: labour, work, play, playbour and gamification. The concepts are defined by drawing on the work of Marx as well as the first-generation critical theorists, such as Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as more modern interpretations. These definitions then lay the groundwork for further analysis. The second section provides an overview of the discussion around the concept of playbour and its various empirical applications. With these manifold applications in mind, it is clear that play and labour intertwine in many different phenomena related to gaming and digital media. The third section presents and defines the key theoretical concepts of this article: alienation, reification and the culture industry. The definitions are made

with both the original formulations of Marx, Lukács and Adorno, as well as current-day applications. These concepts allow for a novel interpretation of playbour within the framework of Critical Theory. In the fourth and final section, the concept of reified gameplay is introduced as a means for interpreting what happens to gameplay itself when play and labour become hard to separate from each other. Reification is analysed as a form of alienation and reified gameplay is situated as occurring within and as part of the culture industry.

Concepts of labour, work, play, playbour and gamification

The sensibility of the concept of playbour itself relies on the differentiation between play and labour. In this section, I offer definitions of work, labour, play, and, ultimately, playbour. Additionally, I briefly outline gamification, a concept that is closely linked to theme of playbour, but which is essentially a different phenomenon.

In the history of philosophy, work and labour have been approached from a wide range of theoretical routes (for an overview, see Cholbi, 2023.) In this text, they are used within the framework of Critical Theory, which means a Marxist understanding of these phenomena. In its broadest sense, work can be defined as an activity that produces value. By working, a subject engages in action with the outside world, and the action changes both the world and the actor themself (Marx, 2015). In the Marxist tradition, work is conceived as a universally human form of activity, whereas labour refers to the historically contingent organisation of work under capitalism (Frayssé, 2014; Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). Work is about producing use values for human survival and well-being. In contrast, labour in the capitalist system is about producing the more abstract surplus value, that is, making a monetary profit. As a result, the labour process is subordinate to the capitalist financial system and its logic of production. This classification can also be defined as a division between concrete labour and abstract labour (Fuchs & Fisher, 2015, p. 9; Marx, 2015, p. 33), but for the sake of simplicity, I will from now on refer to concrete labour as work and abstract labour as labour.

In this Marxist account, work is productive, goal-oriented and instrumental action with many potentially positive qualities. In an ideal case, work can even contribute to self-cultivation and self-expression: one could further say that working in one way or another is an innate human need. Additionally, it is possible to envision truly playful work, that is, work with qualities of play (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). When work is not self-organised, but instead forced labour serving the capitalist system, it has innately alienating qualities. I will explicate these alienating tendencies in the next section, but for now, let us turn to play.

In the classics of game studies, play has been traditionally defined as a free-form activity, which is fulfilling in itself and engaged in with a non-instrumental attitude,

characterised by playfulness. Perhaps the most influential definition is found in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (originally published in 1938):

> Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds with its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (Huizinga, 1998, p. 13)

Although Huizinga does not explicitly contrast play with work/labour in this quotation, their separation is suggested by defining play as a free-form, nonprofit activity situated outside ordinary, everyday life and its material interests.

Roger Caillois has his own famous definition of play presented in *Man, Play, and Games* (originally published in 1958), which is in some respects critical of Huizinga. However, when considering the relation of play to work/labour, his account has much in common with Huizinga:

> There is also no doubt that play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement. A game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play. It would become constraint, drudgery from which one would strive to be freed. … In effect, play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally is engaged in with precise limits of time and place. (Caillois, 1961, p. 6)

Caillois' definition clearly separates play from labour, if one considers labour to be an activity that can be, and often is, forced or done out of outer necessity. It might, however, leave some room for work, as a potentially self-fulfilling and self-organised activity, and play to converge.

Among the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse offers a definition of play in relation to labour (originally published in 1933). Similarly to Huizinga and Caillois, Marcuse defines play as a free-form activity, in which the players place themselves "above the objective world", in the sense that play happens outside the realm of necessities. Moreover, Marcuse makes an important addition [emphasises in the original here and in every other citation used]:

> Play is self-distraction, self-relaxation, self-recuperation *from* regimentation, tension, toil, intense self-awareness, etc. It is self-distraction, self-recuperation *for the purpose* of a new concentration, tension, etc. Thus play in its totality is necessarily related to an other from which it comes

> at which it is aimed, and this other is already preconceived as *labor* through the characteristics of regimentation, tension, toil, etc. (Marcuse, 2005, p. 128)

Summarised briefly, Marcuse observes that play has a societal role as a form of relaxation and distraction from labour, through which the labouring subject finds new energy for their tasks of necessity. Marcuse's formulation bears similarities with how hobbies are observed by Theodor W. Adorno (Adorno, 2002b) and Aleena Chia (Chia, 2020). Chia conceptualises hobbies as productive leisure, as a mediating category between leisure and work/labour (Chia, 2020). After all, when a leisurely activity acquires the label of "hobby", it becomes elevated in the sense that it is seen to be productive, instructive, and most of all, useful in supporting the subject's ability to work (and which can, in a Marxist account, be interpreted as work). In even bolder fashion, Adorno observes that a hobby is something one must have. He claims:

> Organized freedom is compulsory. Woe betide you if you have no hobby, no pastime; then you are a swot or an old-timer, an eccentric, and you will fall prey to ridicule in a society which foists upon you what your free time should be. (Adorno, 2002b, p. 190)

A person is obligated to have a hobby, through which they can relax, perhaps develop some skills, "recharge" and get mentally fresh for labour again. The compulsive nature of having a hobby contains a paradox. A hobby is seen as "the opposite of reification, the oasis of unmediated life within a completely mediated total system" (Adorno, 2002b, p. 189), even though the hobbies are an integral part of this mediated system and could be argued to be reifying in themselves. I will return to this idea later, when addressing the concepts of reification and alienation.

Regarding the nature of these definitions of the ideal form of play and games, they are not to be interpreted as universal, normative truth-statements. Instead, they are conceptions formed in a certain historical and social context. Play is a social phenomenon with an ambivalent and historical character, which has been emphasised, for example, by Brian Sutton-Smith in *The Ambiguity of Play* (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Sutton-Smith identifies seven different rhetorics regarding play, and through them provides a detailed analysis of various perspectives on play in history.

The interpretation of the classic conception of play I have outlined follows the ideas presented by Sebastian Möring and Olli Leino. They argue that the conception of play, endorsed by, among others, Huizinga and Caillois, is a mixture of ideals of romantic and liberal philosophy that are deeply connected to the historical processes of industrialisation and the rise of the nation state. Another self-evident concept for a current-day reader, free time as separated from working hours, would not be so self-evident without these historical developments (Möring & Leino, 2016, p. 1,3).

In summary, Möring and Leino argue that this liberal-romantic conception of play is outdated and that play and labour are, nowadays, irrevocably intertwined. They argue we are subjects within a "neo-liberal condition", who are "prone to be attracted by neo-liberal games". The writers claim the following:

> Not only do neo-liberal games condition us to be good neo-liberal subjects, but since we have never experienced anything else but neo-liberalism we do not even question this conditioning by the respective games and do not know about alternative possibilities. (Möring & Leino, 2016, p. 11)

The concept of neo-liberal subjectivity in gaming refers to the merging of play and labour, which results in the loss of the liberal-romantic idea of freedom. This can be seen in the way games are used to accumulate social capital and build personal brands, essentially objectifying the player.

Möring and Leino provide an intriguing argument about the historical change in the nature of play, and in this broad sense, the argument has similarities with what I am about to present. However, my suggested route is theoretically quite different, since Möring and Leino do not root their analysis in reification and the culture industry. Additionally, Adorno makes a very similar argument regarding the culture industry. Adorno claims we, as subjects of a capitalist society, tend to internalise the values and ways of thinking of our society, and seek entertainment that is coherent with these societal values. Adorno illustrates this with the example of Robinson Crusoe, Daniel Defoe's classical novel character, who was stranded on an uninhabited island and had all the possibilities to start something new. Instead, he ended up trying to reconstruct the world he already knew, because it felt safe and familiar (Adorno, 2002c; Schultzke, 2014).

Now that the concepts of work/labour and play have been addressed, what is playbour? Playbour is when activity which is originally play, or should be play, gains qualities resembling labour. In other words, we have first an activity that is or should be engaged in and meaningful for its own sake, which then gains traits of abstract labour, that is, it starts to be about producing surplus value, and in a sense loses its character as play. However, as we see with the empirical examples in the next section, playbour is rarely defined properly. Therefore, I suggest the novel concept of reified gameplay to avoid the ambiguity created by previous discussions. Additionally, reified gameplay has the advantage of addressing both the societal, structural sources of playbour, as well as its alienating effects on the individual.

The concept of playbour has attracted criticism before, besides the obvious critique that it lacks proper definition. For example, Aleena Chia considers the idea of playbour to be based on a false dichotomy. She claims:

> Playbour is based on a logical incongruence between play and labour, which are not precisely opposed. Unlike labour, play is not a discrete activity but a mode of experience, a dispositional state towards the indeterminate that suffuses various forms of human engagement with the world. (Chia, 2020, p. 51)

Contrary to Chia, I argue that play is indeed a discrete activity and not a mode of experience. Play is often connected to a certain mode of experience, which could be described as playfulness. Nevertheless, playfulness can extend beyond the activity of play: one can feel playful while performing very different kind of activities. This mode of experience is contrasted to the feeling of something being laborious. Regarding the activity of play, ideally it would entail feeling playful, but sometimes a mode of experience can be laborious, even in play.

In addition to Chia, Arwid Lund (2015) provides another interesting critique of playbour. "On a conceptual level," he states, "play and labour are thus each other's opposites: a qualitative non-instrumentality and a quantitative instrumentality." (Lund, 2015, p. 67). Additionally, he claims that playing as an activity should not involve reification. He notes that the concept of playbour is inaccurate and should more appropriately be termed "gamebour" (Lund, 2015, pp. 65, 68). These observations are easy to agree with, but ultimately, his critique is problematic in several significant ways.

Lund's critique of playbour rests on the idea that the concept is ideological, in the sense of "Californian Ideology" (which I interpret to mean neoliberalism) and promoting the fusion of play and labour. This is a bizarre claim and overlooks the history of the concept. As I demonstrate in the third section of this article, the term originates in Kücklich (2005), where it is used in a highly critical manner to explore how the labour of modders is exploited. Later on, further research has usually retained the idea that the concept is inherently critical. Regarding this matter of ideological usage, one might want to turn to a concept that is closely related to playbour, gamification. These concepts can be interpreted as two sides of the same coin: in playbour, a form of activity that is originally play gains characteristics reminiscent of labour. In gamification, on the other hand, a form of activity that is originally something other than play (often labour) is made more "fun" by imposing game- or play-like elements on it. Gamification as a concept is used both in a non-critical (ideological) and critical sense (for the latter, see e.g. Rey, 2015). To be more specific, these critical accounts rest on the idea of gamification as "gamification-from-above", which can occur when management at the workplace imposes game-like elements on work with aims such as surveillance, regulation and instrumental rationalisation (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017). This process can lead to reification as well, (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017), but through a slightly different manner than in playbour. Besides this usage, gamification can also happen from below, in which the game-like elements are added to work for a subjective need, perhaps even undermining work and acting as a playful form of resistance. In other words, in gamification, the point

is not to claim that game- or play-like elements are themselves a problem in other contexts. It is always a question of why and how they are implemented (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017).

Previous empirical observations of playbour

Kücklich introduced the concept of playbour in 2005 in an analysis of modding as a labour-like activity, through which modders (short for people making mods) produce new content for existing video games. Modders typically receive no monetary compensation themselves, even though they produce new content for a video game or sometimes fix existing bugs and glitches of a game and therefore benefit the game developer and publisher. Modding can be seen to be like play, in the sense that it is a free-form activity that modders engage in without necessity or coercion. At the same time, they are producing something new for a game, and by extension, economic surplus value, from which they themselves receive no benefit. In that sense, modding resembles labour. Occasionally, successful modders might be hired by game companies, which can happen through mod competitions, as described in Sotamaa (2007). Along with modding, Foxman (2022) has acknowledged that nowadays playbour concerns user-generated content (UGC) in general, of which modding is only a part.

Another form of UGC is broadcasting and making videos via Twitch and/or YouTube. Törhönen et al. have studied this in the limited sense of "how the perception of personal broadcasting as work, play or as playbour, affects the activity levels and income of a personal broadcaster " (Törhönen et al., 2019, p. 2560). Törhönen et al. also observe that streamers and YouTubers have differing opinions regarding the question of whether they consider streaming or making videos as work/labour, play or a mixture of both. Interestingly, Törhönen et al. consider the respondents who perceive their streaming and YouTubing to be play as "hobbyists", making no differentiation between hobby and leisure in their study. Regarding the nature of streaming and YouTubing as work/labour, Törhönen et al. also acknowledge that it takes the form of digital entrepreneurship, which makes the activities a clearly different profession than "gold farming" or e-sports, for example.

Gold farming refers to the gathering of in-game, virtual goods within a video game, and selling them, or possibly an entire user account, for real-world money. Whole enterprises have been formed around this practice. The ambiguous nature of playbour can be seen in the views of the Chinese "gold farm" workers, who are divided over the question of whether their profession is labour or play, with some stating that there is no longer any difference (Dibbell, 2006, 2007; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Goggin, 2011). Furthermore, gold farming as a practice blurs the line between labour and play in the sense, that the gameplay activity the gold farm labourers engage in is the same activity other players do for leisure (Schultzke, 2014), only

with different motivations and objectives. The same can be said of e-sports practitioners.

In the article "Alienated Playbour: Relation of Production in EVE Online", Taylor et al. (2015) analyse the community and economy of *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003) through the concepts of immaterial labour and playbour. *EVE Online* is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) set in space. In *EVE*, players can engage in different kind of activities and assume roles reminiscent of virtual professions, such as mining, manufacturing or combat. Within the game, players can visit thousands of star systems. In their article, Taylor et al. offer an insightful interpretation of how *EVE*'s gameplay systems form a certain kind of virtual simulation of capitalism, with its class divisions, inequalities, and even alienation of the virtual playbourers.

A clear picture emerges of how the mechanics of *EVE Online* reproduce the fundamental class divisions of the capitalist system. Or rather, the "class antagonism is recast" (Taylor et al., 2015), in the sense that all the players are capitalists, and the manual labour is performed by spacecraft, while the players end up being divided between being producers of wealth and consumers of it. The authors argue that both groups can be seen as alienated from their labour.

Furthermore, the article remarks on how the gameplay in *EVE Online* occasionally resembles labour in a straightforward sense. One interviewed software engineer states that in *EVE* he performs tasks that are very similar to those he carries out in his actual profession and utilises the same skills in both (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 377). This is closely related to what Theodor W. Adorno stated is a characteristic feature of the culture industry: leisurely free time activities end up not only supporting labour, as we could say with Marcuse, but even become a prolongation of it, and through that reminiscent of labour (Adorno, 2002b, p. 194; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 109).

The question of what is produced and in what sense is interesting in the case of *EVE Online*. Within the game, its production processes are highly rationalised and resemble real-world economical processes, but what is really manufactured? Following Schultzke (2014), this "production" process can be said to be mere façade, in the sense that the labour players invest in producing the in-game commodities is not actually necessary. Mining virtual goods online merely simulates the toil of mining physical goods in a mine, and is more of a developed gameplay mechanic, rather than an actual necessity. Adorno has earlier observed that one trait of the culture industry is how it "is industrial more in a sociological sense, in the incorporation of industrial forms of organization even when nothing is manufactured" (Adorno, 2002a, p. 101). It can be claimed, however, that the players are, in fact, producing virtual commodities. The ore and resources mined can be used to craft ships, which in turn are sold on third-party websites in exchange for real-world money. This practice is not endorsed by the developers, and it violates the game's terms of service.

In other words, the virtual commodities of *EVE* are not meant to be turned into actual commodities, but in practice this is what takes place.

The players position themselves within limiting and fixed system, at least regarding their social role and part as a cogwheel of the *EVE* economy. They might still find pleasure doing it, and engage in it freely, in the sense that taking part in the system is not necessary for their actual survival and income outside the virtual space of *EVE.* Through that we can identify an interesting feature of *EVE*: because no person's actual income is at stake, economic catastrophes within the game and even purposely destroying other peoples fortune might be shrugged off and taken lightly. It is kind of simulation of "high-stakes capitalism without the guilt" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 383). Interestingly, the players themselves are aware of this nature of the game as a capitalism simulator and refer to it using terms such as "free-market" or "neoliberal", as noted in Milik (2016). Along with Milik's text, the book *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader* (Carter et al., 2016) features several chapters regarding different aspects of *EVE*. In this article, however, Taylor et al. is my main reference, because my focus is the theme of playbour, not the game itself.

It has been stated that *EVE* does not just resemble work/labour, but that it "*is already work* – that is, activity that generates wealth within and for a broader economic order that is itself increasingly virtual" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 368). The authors continue by stating that "under conditions in which work and play are becoming economically indistinct, holding on to a *theoretical* separation between the two seems untenable. " (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 372). This conclusion seems too definite and rather hopeless for the possibility of play that is not tainted by the economic imperatives of the culture industry. I will return to this question in the conclusion, but for now, I will turn to the key concepts of this article: alienation, reification and the culture industry.

Alienation, reification and the culture industry

By recreating the social reality of capitalism in a video game form, with relations of production, class antagonisms and such, *EVE Online* provides a tangible example of alienation. Especially the industrial players, which form the lower strata, struggle with a highly unequal virtual system, in which they become alienated from their labour in several senses,

> …appropriated both by other corporations (often violently) toward the conspicuous consumption of and destruction of ISK (New Eden's currency), and by CCP toward the cultivation of capital through more subscription fees and, crucially, through intellectual property enhanced by the immaterial labor of *all* players. (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 380)

However, it is not entirely clear how Taylor et al. understand the concept and phenomenon of "alienation" since they provide no clear definition. Alienation is a rich,

multifaceted concept. Next, I will turn my attention to the concept in its original form, as defined by Karl Marx in his "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (Marx, 2009). Using Marx, I analyse which aspects of alienation are in play in this context.

For Marx, alienation is a four-fold phenomenon (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013, p. 245). Firstly, a worker can be alienated from the product of their labour. When the process of (abstract) labour of producing commodities is complete, the result is an object alien to its maker. Marx even states that labours product becomes "a *power independent* of the producer" (Marx, 2009, p. 29), in a way taking its own role within the system. Marx continues:

> Labor's realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object and bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*. (Marx, 2009, p. 29)

This first aspect of alienation can be described as objective alienation, in which one becomes alienated from the commodity they have produced. I interpret that Taylor et al. have this aspect of alienation in mind when describing "alienated playbour" within *EVE Online*. This alienation from the product is closely linked to the second aspect of alienation, which regards the labour process itself (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013), often involving forced labour.

Thirdly, there is a subjective aspect of alienation. In Marx's formulation:

> Labor is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. (Marx, 2009, p.30)

This subjective side of alienation means self-estrangement, which can be observed as engaging in action against one's nature, and in an extreme case losing oneself in the process. Besides oneself, a person can be alienated socially, from other people and society (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013). After Marx, Georg Lukács is known for developing the concept of reification, and with it, analysing especially the social aspect of alienation further.

Reification can be described as a form of alienation, in which social relations take a commodity form. Lukács' concept is strongly influenced on the one hand by Marx, especially *Capital* (Marx, 2015), and on the other, Max Weber. From the former, he takes the analysis of commodity form, and from the latter, the process of rationalisation. The following quotation illustrates Lukács' account:

> The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people. (Lukács, 1971, p. 83)

Comparing Lukács' account to Marx, Lukács emphasises more the role of rationalisation, as it is thoroughly embedded in the process of reification as an essential source of alienation. Lukács argues:

> This fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentation of its subject. In consequence of the rationalisation of the work-process the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as mere sources of error when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions. (Lukács, 1971, p. 89)

As the previous quotation implies, the phenomenon of reification is closely linked to rationalisation, but in a specific sense. For Lukács, rationalism is the guiding principle of the current capitalist system, "universal method with which to obtain knowledge of the whole of existence" (Lukács, 1971, p. 114). Rationalisation in modern society entails the bureaucratisation, quantification and mechanisation of reality in a subjective, objective and social sense. Lukács' account is highly influenced by Max Weber and especially his concept of formal rationality (Weber, 2011). In his 1905 work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber presents his critical description of rationality, in which rationality of a certain action is evaluated based on how that action applies rational formal norms and principles. Rationality is about coherence. The question of the goal of the action is irrelevant when evaluating rationality: it is all about the process.

In recent years, the concept of reification has been somewhat out of favour. While some aspects of Lukács' concept might seem obsolete for a modern reader, there are considerable strengths remaining in the argument that are worth remarking on. In a recent article, Andrew Feenberg has stated that

> ...the theory of reification thus explains the relation of structure to agency. Reification provides structure through determining a specific type of practice that reproduces institutions, while dereification involves another type of practice, with the power not only to penetrate the illusion of reification but to transform the practices and the structures it establishes. (Feenberg, 2015, p. 490)

As illustrated by Feenberg, reification still has explanatory power while researching the interplay of subjects and institutions, providing an illustrative point of departure for analysis of related processes.

Regarding what kind of objectification Lukács strives to pursue, Feenberg continues: "It is the specific form of thinghood that is in question, a form of thinghood that situates the subject in a technical relation to a law-governed world" (Feenberg, 2015, pp. 492–493). Following Feenberg, I interpret that this is an aspect which is relevant in Lukács for present-day discussions, and it was a crucial aspect and motivation for critical theoretical thinkers, such as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Next, I will turn my attention to their interpretation and continuation of the critique of reified rationality, and how it is embedded in the critique of the culture industry.

Adorno and Horkheimer describe reason in a similar vein with Lukács in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, or to be more precise, its dominant form, instrumental reason. As with Weber and Lukács, instrumental reason is a mode of rationality capable of calculation and quantification: institutionally effective handling of bureaucratic processes. Instrumental reason is not interested in substance, questions of objective or why a certain objective is pursued: it is only about getting there in the most effective manner, wherever "there" might be. For Adorno and Horkheimer, this is the source of reification, and the rationality behind the culture industry.

When talking about the culture industry, Adorno has a twofold definition in mind. The culture industry is both a literal branch of industry, and a figurative one. The latter

> …refers to the standardization of the thing itself – such as that of the Western, familiar to every movie-goer – and to the rationalization of distribution techniques, but not strictly to the production process. … It is industrial more in a sociological sense, in the incorporation of industrial forms of organization even when nothing is manufactured – as in the rationalization of office work – rather than in the sense of anything really and actually produced by technological rationality. (Adorno, 2002a, pp. 100–101)

Like instrumental reason, the culture industry is not in the end interested in substance or content. It is about "the reconciliation of the general and the particular" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 102) in a forceful manner, which results in the products of the culture industry resembling each other more and more: movies recycle the same tropes of storytelling, while in music, the same chord progressions are repeated. In film and games, high-profile studios put an emphasis on effects, appearances and following familiar paths in storytelling and mechanics: anything else would be a financial risk. At the same time, for the individual, there is the looming promise of fame and success, but for most people, such effort might result in 15 minutes of fame or 15 people watching your Twitch stream. Regarding the consumers' needs in general,

> …while all needs should be presented to individuals as capable of fulfilment by the culture industry, they should be so set up in advance that

> individuals experience themselves through their needs only as eternal consumers, as the culture industry's object. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 113)

The nature of the consumer as an object of the culture industry, for whom new needs are generated and left unfulfilled, can be seen in the case of *Pocket Planes* (NimbleBit, 2012), as analysed by Möring and Leino (2016). *Pocket Planes* is a free-to-play mobile game, which simulates airline management. Möring and Leino interpret the game as illustrative of the current-day condition in the sense that the game has the promise of self-realisation and fulfilment by achieving certain goals and objectives, but the player soon realises that the promise is an empty one: "The coming-up of new possibilities devalues the labour invested in so far. The player will soon realize that the goalposts are moving" (Möring & Leino, 2016, p. 8). These ever-shifting goals are characteristic of the culture industry. According to Adorno, the products of the culture industry contain a promise of self-realisation and fulfilment, and that promise is repeatedly broken by generating new needs to fulfil. This is the affective side of keeping the culture industry running.

The example of *Pocket Planes* also illustrates the player-consumer as both the subject and object of the culture industry. Besides being an object, for whom new needs are generated, the gameplay necessarily involves player agency by its very nature, in contrast to watching a movie, which is a rather passive action. In the example, the player can observe, through their own agency, that the objective of the game is actively escaping them, and their own involvement in the process. However, that agency then becomes meaningless as soon as this observation is made.

Darrow Schechter has stated that "if Marx offers a political economy of reification based on alienated labour, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* outlines a genealogy of reification based on alienated nature" (Schechter, 2010, p. 94). With these two approaches to reification in mind, I will turn to the concept of reified gameplay.

Reified gameplay

To analyse how the nature of (game)play is evolving within such products of the contemporary culture industry as *EVE Online*, I propose the concept of *reified gameplay*. As illustrated in the previous chapter, this concept is built upon the theoretical insights of Georg Lukács, Karl Marx, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Reified gameplay can be characterised as gameplay that has been instrumentalised and rationalised thoroughly to serve economic purposes, with remarkable alienating features. In the case of *EVE* industrialists analysed by Taylor et al. (2015), one can observe the gameplay revolving around the instrumental action of mining ore, building things off it and keeping the economy of the game running while also recreating within the game the social relations of class antagonism of the economic order that exists outside the game. Gameplay revolves around players being in a very technical

relation to the system and other players within it, playing their part and filling their role. It is a role they have willingly taken on and have no economic necessity (in terms of surviving as a person, outside of the game) to continue fulfilling, but in order to continue playing, it can be argued they have major obligations to fulfil. In that sense, their agency is structurally limited and resembles labour. In some cases, it just is labour, if we acknowledge the fact that player-built in-game ships can be turned into actual commodities by selling them for real-world money.

If one contrasts this kind of play situation to the classical definitions introduced in the first section, there are few characteristics of "play" involved here. In contrast to Huizinga, it is not the case here that the play activity would have no material interest, or that there would be no profit involved. The questions of the seriousness of the activity and its separation from the world outside the game are somewhat hazy. On the one hand, the gameplay is in a certain sense an activity in a closed space that players can enter and exit at will. On the other hand, the rules of the game mimic the economic imperatives of capitalism outside of it in such a strong sense, that the many roles within the play activity resemble similar tasks that players carry out in their actual working life, as illustrated by Taylor et al.

Adorno (1997) presents a critical argument of play as a form of activity. He argues that play activity inherently involves repetitiveness: performing the same tasks over and over again, for the sake of one's amusement. Adorno claims:

> In all play, action has fundamentally divested itself of any relation to purpose, but in terms of its form and execution the relation to praxis is maintained. The element of repetition in play is the afterimage of unfree labor. (Adorno, 1997, p. 418)

Here Adorno is critical of Huizinga's idea of play being free of any relations to praxis or purpose outside itself and argues that the connection to praxis outside the sphere of play remains, no matter the players or their intentions. Moreover, there is a connection between play and labour through the element of repetition involved in both.

Taken as it is, I find the claim that all play is repetitive too generalising, since play and games have gained many new forms after the publication of Adorno's text in 1970, and it is not clear that all those forms are repetitive. Nevertheless, I argue repetitiveness to be inherently present when activity takes the form of playbour. Performing laborious tasks is necessarily repetitive, and gameplay in the form of playbour inherits that trait, as has been seen in the previous examples in this article.

As observed in the second section, Herbert Marcuse demostrated a connection between play and labour already in the 1930s. He claimed that play has a clear societal role of relaxation and distraction from work, so that the worker can return to their toil refreshed (Marcuse, 2005). However, Marcuse did not have the concept of the

culture industry at his disposal, which limits the analytical force of his conception of play.

With the concept of the culture industry, the connections between play and economic imperatives can be made eminent. While play activity starts to resemble labour activity in a rather accurate sense, as in the playbourer utilises the same skills in both, the activity happening leisurely can be seen as practice for actual labour, and therefore a continuation of it. As Horkheimer and Adorno claimed already in the 1940s, "Entertainment is prolongation of work under later capitalism" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 109), and one can hardly find a more illustrative example of this than what Taylor et al. have found in their study.

As Taylor et al. have stated, this gameplay activity has alienating features. They observe that in their example, *EVE Online*, it can be argued that the players engaging in action reminiscent of labour are alienated from the products of their labour, which corresponds with the idea of an objective side of alienation, as described by Marx.

Regarding the subjective side of alienation, which means self-estrangement, the question becomes more complex. On the one hand, it could be argued that these two sides are interconnected by the alienating process itself, and therefore the alienation of the worker from their production and from themself are part of the same process. On the other, this subjective side of alienation has some qualities that fail to adequately fit our example. For example, Marx states that workers engage in action that is unnatural to them, and that the activity is coerced (Marx, 2009, p. 30). Yet while playing *EVE*, or any other game for leisure, the player always has a choice to quit and do something else instead, at least in principle. In practice, quitting might not be so simple. The player might be heavily invested mentally, or even addicted to the play practice, or they can have social obligations regarding the game, such as a certain role in a guild. Nevertheless, Marx (2015) has observed, while engaging in labour, the labouring subject moulds both the world around them and themself. Therefore, when the form of activity is playbour, it entails changes in the playbouring subject.

Of course, there is also the social aspect of alienation, that is reification, or the commodification of social relations. This aspect can be clearly observed in *EVE* with its class antagonisms and social stratification within the game world, in which the social relations become instrumentalised. It is not suggested that the gameplay systems forbid any other type of action besides instrumental action. Rather, it is just the systems strongly promote this type of social action.

Reified gameplay is, ultimately, a form of gameplay action characterised by processes of reification and rationalisation, processes that emerge because the game is a product of the culture industry. The logic of capitalist production, which is the underlying logic within the culture industry, does not restrict itself to just production

and publishing the game, or other external aspects, but rather penetrates the gameplay itself. Therefore, the structure of the culture industry affects player in-game agency to a considerable degree. In reified gameplay, players find themselves performing repetitive tasks in a play experience that is alienating and resembles labour.

The concept of reified gameplay has several advantages compared to playbour. Firstly, playbour as a concept has been used rather opaquely and without proper definition. Secondly, the idea of play as reified inherently turns one's attention to the structural and societal factors that change the nature of gameplay activity. To take the theme of playbour seriously, we need to take labour seriously. That means understanding labour as a historically contingent form of work, which is about the abstract production of surplus value. That aspect can be found in *EVE*, as well as in the next example.

A further interesting example of reified gameplay can be found from the field of games that use cryptocurrencies and blockchain technology. Cryptogames can be defined as "games that use blockchain technology, cryptocurrencies as payments, or (typically) both" (Serada et al., 2021, p. 458). Serada et al. have analysed a certain game of this genre, *CryptoKitties* (Dapper Labs, 2017), and its gameplay and economy. The game revolves around so-called cryptokitties, which are virtual cats and non-fungible tokens (NFT). As NFTs, each kitten in the game is unique, has its own set of qualities and a monetary value based on those qualities. The ownership of a kitten is guaranteed by blockchain, as with any other kind of NFT. Gameplay in *CryptoKitties* revolves around breeding, trading and gifting these virtual cats, with the ultimate goal of attaining a cat with as rare and valuable qualities as possible (Serada et al., 2021).

Although the aforementioned article does not analyse *CryptoKitties* using concepts such as playbour or reification, such a connection can be made in a fruitful manner. While the gameplay objective itself is basically about generating cryptocurrency value, there is very little "play" in the sense outlined earlier in this article. When every single action in the game costs real money, there is little "playfulness" and it seems that "the players of *CryptoKitties* are paying for the maintenance of the game" (Serada et al., 2021, p. 467). I propose that the concept of reified gameplay could be a fruitful theoretical point of departure for further empirical studies of *CryptoKitties* and similar games, since the gameplay revolves around creating cryptocurrency value, and the in-game social encounters are about trading these generated NFTs.

Conclusions

I have proposed a novel concept of reified gameplay to realign the discussion on playbour and to further elaborate on the theoretical implications of how play and labour intertwine in the context of present-day video games. I place the concept of reified gameplay within the economic context of the culture industry. The analysis is

informed by both the relevant classics and modern theoretical specifications, as well as previous empirical observations regarding instances of playbour. An important inspiration and starting point has been the idea of "alienated playbour" as illustrated by Taylor et al., and my work can be seen as elaboration and theoretical development of the idea presented there.

Taylor et al. make a striking conclusion about the intertwining of play and labour. As I have stated, their conclusion that holding on to the theoretical separation of these concepts is untenable in present-day conditions seems rather hopeless and too definite. In a similar vein, Möring and Leino argue that we, as players and subjects, are grown to be part of the current-day, neoliberal condition and its inner logic, and therefore it is hard to even question the current-day condition, yet alone to imagine other possibilities. Furthermore, Fuchs and Sevignani, (2013) claim that play and labour can no longer be distinguished, since play has been commodified and our free time is exploited by capital.

Should it therefore simply be accepted that modern-day gamers are merely cogs and consumers of the culture industry? Is any discussion of gameplay as separate from labour and something other than a continuation of it or the growth of "human capital" simply nostalgic longing for a bygone era?

In Critical Theory, the aforementioned problem is formulated as a question of immanent critique, to which there is no easy solution. As subjects of a certain socio-historical condition, how can we achieve or imagine something beyond our current-day situation, when our theoretical tools and understanding are limited by that same current-day situation?

Adorno is well-known for his critique of the culture industry and the reification occurring within it that has been illustrated in this article. At the same time, Adorno sees in art a possibility to overcome this overwhelming rationalisation and reification. In modern terms, art can be said to have affective possibilities, which Adorno sees as potentially emancipatory, and which can be made meaningful and brought to understanding via a process called mimesis. But whether this idea of the unique potential of art can be applied to the video games of the 2020s is a point of departure for further research.

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