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The Virtual Culture Industry: Work and Play in Virtual Worlds

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This essay uses Horkheimer and Adorno's work on the culture industry to analyze virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online role-playing games. While artificial worlds have enormous potential to facilitate communication, transcend spatial boundaries, promote free expression, and protect marginalized groups, the utopian promise of these worlds is undermined by their mirroring of real-world market systems, the exploitation of labor, and blurring the line between entertainment and work. The culture industry thesis provides a useful starting point for theorizing virtual worlds and explaining why these places have become mirrors of real-world economic relations.

Keywords Adorno, critical theory, culture industry, Horkheimer, virtual worlds

Many works by Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Lowenthal, and other members of the first generation of the Frankfurt School were examinations of new media and their social consequences. Given this history of theorizing new technologies, it is surprising that contemporary theorists have not tested the applicability of theories developed by early critical theorists to the technologies of the 21st century. The studies that have drawn on Frankfurt School critical theory to understand digital media, virtual worlds in particular, tend to borrow from the work of later theorists, especially Habermas, without saying much about earlier members of the Frankfurt School (Gordon and Koo 2008). Such studies have made important contributions to the understanding of new technologies, but they tend to focus on the way technologies facilitate communicative action while overlooking these technologies' costs or their unrealized potential. This essay takes a different route by using the culture industry thesis developed by Horkheimer and Adorno to analyze the reproduction of free market institutions and labor practices in virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). This provides a counterpoint to more optimistic assessments of the potential of new media to be instruments of social progress or personal improvement.

There are important differences between virtual worlds and MMORPGs; while the former are directed at facilitating interaction between players and providing them with a space in which to create their own roles, the latter are based on cooperative gaming. However, beyond the specific instances where the differences between them are relevant, I refer to these two types of simulations collectively as MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games) and focus on their shared attributes. Despite their differences, virtual worlds and MMORPGs are similar in that they often give rise to complex social and economic institutions, develop their own cultures, and foster associational networks among their players. MMOGs have a great deal of potential to serve as platforms for progressive initiatives, especially insofar as they encourage communication between users and provide members of marginalized groups with forums in which to meet. At times MMOGs even appear to represent the vision of utopia that members of the Frankfurt School consider essential to critical analysis of the status quo, as MMOGs can be structured in almost any way imaginable. However, because utopian critique depends on presenting alternative ways of life that challenge the status quo, the utopian capacity of MMOGs is seriously compromised when they uncritically mirror the economic conditions of the societies that create them.

Although MMOGs are set in myriad different places and are highly customizable, they are usually structured according to the logic of capitalist market systems. The apparent freedom and diversity within MMOGs hides the fact that these worlds are generally structured according to the same underlying system of commodity accumulation and consumption that governs real-world economic

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interactions. This leads MMOGs to mirror the real world and to reproduce some of the inequities of the free market system while also hiding this process of mirroring under the veil of superficial differences in setting and narrative. The blurring of the line between work and play within MMOGs is evidence of the reproduction of real-world economic realities in spaces that suggest the promise of utopia. MMOGs encourage players to express themselves freely and present vast open worlds for them to explore. However, MMOGs commodify this experience and create settings in which players must become virtual workers who spend much of their time engaging in activities that resemble productive labor. The laboriousness of some aspects of "play" in MMOGs has even given rise to virtual exploitation, as laborious play is outsourced to players in developing countries. As I argue in this article, the culture industry thesis shows that the blurring lines between work and play and the existence of play that is experienced as being so laborious that it can be outsourced is a reflection of how MMOGs have reproduced the market system, along with some of its worst characteristics.

It is important to state at the outset that my point in applying the culture industry thesis as a critique of MMOGs is not to show that MMOGs are intrinsically flawed or that the problems I note are universal to the medium. I also do not deny that MMOGs have many benefits for players, as studies have shown that they have educational (Gee 2007) and associational benefits (Gordon and Koo 2008; Schulzke 2011). Rather, my argument is that, despite their many outward appearances of being radically different from the real world, MMOGs tend to be based around economic structures similar to those of Western capitalism, which limits their capacity to bear utopian alternatives. It is also important to clarify some of the concepts I use to describe MMOGs. I use the concepts of work/labor to describe productive activities that are undertaken with the goal of producing commodities, and I will oppose these concepts to leisure/play, which I treat as free activity that exists apart from and in opposition to work/labor. However, my analysis problematizes these concepts to show that MMOGs tend to reproduce real-world economic institutions in such a way that what are ostensibly leisure activities become a new sphere of work, thereby limiting the extent to which it is possible to imagine a sphere of activity that is truly outside of work. Thus, the line between the concepts of work and play tends to blur in MMOGs, with the latter increasingly resembling the former. This demonstrates the expansion of market logic into leisure time, which is at the heart of the culture industry thesis.

The first part of this essay discusses the role of utopia in critical theory and the extent to which MMOGs can spawn utopia. I argue that MMOGs can offer alternative, utopian ways of life, yet they generally fail to create a standpoint from which to critique the real world. The second section provides evidence that virtual worlds and MMORPGs, fall short of their utopian potential by describing how they create real exploitation. The third section explains that MMOGs exploitation arises from the extent to which play resembles work and argues that exploitation is therefore the result of the kind of entertainment that MMOGs are often used to create. The fourth and fifth sections adapt Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry thesis to explain why players engage in play that resembles work and why MMOGs have reproduced real-world inequalities. The fourth section argues that despite their apparent diversity and customizability, MMOGs tend to be structurally similar because they are based on systems of consumption and exchange. The fifth section elaborates on the role of consumerism and free market values in MMOGs and applies the culture industry thesis to account for why players are willing participants in this process.

UTOPIAN SPACES

One of the central themes of Frankfurt School critical theory is that the world does not have to be the way that it is. The prevailing form of social, political, and economic life has the false appearance of necessity. It often seems to be the only way the world could be arranged, yet it is a contingent, alterable state of affairs. Recognizing the social order's contingency and alterability is an essential precondition for remaking it in progressive ways. Members of the first generation of the Frankfurt School considered aesthetic expression to be one of the best means of developing a critical point of view that exposes the falsity of the status quo's apparent necessity. Aesthetic representations of utopia—even a utopia that may never be realized—provide a perspective from which to criticize the status quo by showing that alternative ways of life are possible. The aesthetic preserves this alternative vision of life as it could be under different circumstances, allowing it to serve as an immanent critique of the status quo even when radical social and political change is impossible (Adorno 1998; Marcuse 1972; 1978).

Utopia remains a popular topic in social theory, though it rarely goes by this name. Over the past two decades, some social theorists have explored a different form of utopian thinking—one found in the free spaces of expression provided by digital media (Gunkel 2003; Brookey 2009). As Brookey says, "There is a strong tendency among many scholars of cyberspace to offer it up as a new utopia" (2009, 101). MMOGs are among the media that are often credited with introducing utopian possibilities for free expression and association. Galloway says that "virtual worlds are always in some basic way the expression of utopian desire" (2004, online). Bittarello argues that virtual worlds are the heirs to utopian literature of the past. Each virtual world is evidence of a desire to

create other worlds and alternative, often superior, ways of life in "mythic space" (2008, 6). Whatever their form and setting, virtual worlds hold the power to explore different ways of life and therefore to create a vision of utopia that could challenge the status quo.

Because MMOGs are simulated places that host large numbers of players in shared environments, they have a great deal of potential to facilitate utopian social experimentation or to offer the kind of aesthetic vision of utopia the Frankfurt School theorists find useful. MMOGs' immense size, malleability, and diversity make them ideal settings for showing different ways of life. Some have populations as large as cities or even small countries. *World of Warcraft* has more than 11 million users (Nardi 2010), and more than 13 million people have played *Second Life* (Dell 2008). They are set in a wide variety of settings, including fantasy worlds, distant galaxies, historical settings, and fictional places modeled after the real world. Each has its own political institutions, economic systems (Castronova 2005; 2007), and associational activities (Schulzke 2011), which may be designed in countless different ways. MMOGs also introduce new possibilities of expressing individual freedom by allowing users to create personalized characters, to overcome their physical limitations, and to overcome geographical limitations in order to communicate with other people around the world.

MMOGs seem especially promising as utopian spaces when one considers how closely they fit the characteristics Marcuse associates with utopia. Of all the members of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse probably comes the closest to imaging utopia as a place that could be created through the use of new media. In *One Dimensional Man*, he argues that new technologies can free people from necessity, allowing them to devote more time to activities other than work (Marcuse 1964). He envisions the potential of labor-saving technology to dramatically improve human freedom by limiting the amount of time people have to spend performing labor activities and, by extension, limiting the time they must spend selling their labor. Within MMOGs, there is complete freedom from necessity that simulates the kind of freedom Marcuse describes. Not only can machines perform much of the labor to sustain these worlds, as Marcuse hoped they might be able to in the real world, but the avatars that players control are themselves free from human needs. Although this does not liberate the players themselves, the existence of a space free from necessity can present an image of a world that is not driven by constant labor. MMOGs can therefore potentially serve as aesthetic utopias that explore the possibilities of living without the need to sell labor or with other alterations of the market system.

Research on MMOGs has shown that they have many emancipatory dimensions. Players use them to experiment with different identities (Wolfendale 2007; Waggoner 2009), to communicate more freely with others (Schulzke 2011; Taylor 2006), and to raise awareness of marginalized groups (Filiciak 2003; Turkle 1997; Wolfendale 2007; Waggoner 2009). Educational research suggests that MMOGs can help players learn, acquire new skills, and strengthen their problem solving abilities (Gee 2007; Gee and Hayes 2010). MMOGs are also dynamic places that can continually change and develop, which mitigates the tendency of utopian initiatives to ossify. However, despite these advantages, it is important to see the duality of MMOGs. As Marcuse warned, technology can help to overcome necessity, yet it can also be used to create "a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom" (Marcuse 1964, 1) that allows people to cope with their unpleasant daily lives while ignoring deeper problems. To some extent, this seems to be the role that MMOGs now have, as they sometimes reproduce many of the same repressive institutions of the real world, thereby compromising their critical potential.

EXPLOITATION IN MMOGS

Many MMOGs have their own economic systems, complete with resource extraction, the conversion of raw materials into commodities, advertising, and sales (Castronova 2005; 2007; Yee 2006b). These economies are maintained by currencies that can be used to purchase virtual goods and services, or that can be exchanged for real money. Virtual economies invariably follow a capitalist model, according to which players compete to accumulate more virtual goods or virtual currency than other players. Economic competition adds difficulty to MMOGs, which is essential for them to remain interesting to players (Juul 2013). Thus, virtual free market and its inequalities serve important functions. However, they also limit the extent to which MMOGs might experiment with alternative economic arrangements and lead MMOGs to produce new forms of exploitation in the Marxist sense of employing workers to create more value than they are paid for (Marx 1990). This challenges utopian narratives about digital media and reveals the extent to which MMOGs mirror some of the most destructive aspects of the real world's capitalist market system. Two of the clearest examples of the exploitation of labor in MMOGs are gold farming and power leveling.

To some extent, MMOGs are intrinsically unequal. Only those who have to an Internet connection, can afford monthly subscription fees, and have free time can participate in MMOGs. This leads membership in MMOGs to reflect the unequal distribution of resources in the real world. However, inequality in MMOGs is not simply a matter of excluding those who cannot afford to play. Inequality can also serve as the basis for inclusion. Some players take part in MMOGs because of their low

economic status. These players act as the wage laborers who help virtual free market systems function by providing a cheap source of labor.

One of the wage labor activities, commonly known as "gold farming," is the practice of collecting virtual currency to sell to other players for real money. Although gold farming is forbidden in most MMOGs, it is a major industry. In China, the gold farming industry employs around 100,000 workers and conducts trades for around $1.8 billion each year (Dibbell 2007). Most gold farmers work under sweatshop conditions, with the same long hours, poor conditions, and low pay, like sweatshop workers who produce real goods. In one study, Julian Dibbell profiles Li Qiwe, an average Chinese gold farmer who spends twelve hours a night, seven nights a week, performing repetitive tasks in *World of Warcraft* to earn virtual gold (Dibbell 2007). He is paid by the amount of gold he gathers and earns an average wage of around 30 cents an hour. His boss receives around $3 when he sells the gold to the retailer, who will then sell it for $20 to a player in Europe or North America. Thus, despite playing the most important role in producing the virtual gold, Li Qiwe and other gold farmers receive low wages.

Gold farming not only reproduces the economic inequalities of the real world but is also a source of social inequalities within MMOGs. Players who resent the effects gold farming has on currency inflation or who see gold farmers as easy targets hunt and kill the gold farmers' characters—an act that costs them real wages and that can even cause them to lose their jobs (Dibbell 2007). Because so many of the people who earn their living in MMOGs are Chinese, other players often describe their hatred of gold farming using racist language or discriminate against players whose poor knowledge of English suggests that they might be Chinese (Dibbell 2007).

Although gold farming is like other kinds of wage labor in many respects, two characteristics distinguish it. First, gold farming produces goods that have artificial scarcity. The dominant narrative in economics is that scarcity directs pricing. The less common a good is, the more difficult it is to produce, or the more difficult it is to allocate, the more its owner can charge when selling it. This is a plausible explanation for the pricing of real-world goods, but it is unsatisfying when applied to virtual goods. Virtual goods only exist in limited numbers, but not because of any inherent scarcity. They are infinitely reproducible and only limited by the amount of storage space they take up on a computer. Nevertheless, developers impose scarcity on these goods by limiting the number of copies and forcing users to work to acquire more. The scarcity of virtual goods is part of what makes MMOGs challenging, yet it also leads to the strange consequence that players work long hours to produce more of something that is unlimited and that could be reproduced almost instantly. Moreover, artificial scarcity in MMOGs is very different from other types of artificial scarcity, such as restrictions on the digital reproduction of movies and music. Although the reproduction of most digital goods is a matter of limiting the transferal of data from one place to another so users can be charged a fee, the production of goods in MMOGs often involves simulated labor activities, such as mining or building, that attempt to simulate the labor activities that would produce the item in the real world. In other words, the production of virtual goods involves labor that is unnecessary for reproducing the goods. This also distinguishes the production of virtual goods from other types of explotation of labor online, such as paying people low wages for real-world services (Scholz 2013; Ross 2013).

Second, gold farming is unlike other forms of exploitation because the workers earning by producing currency are engaged in work that is framed as a leisure activity. MMOGs are ostensibly a form of entertainment that players enjoy during their free time. The actions gold farmers perform are almost indistinguishable from the actions of those who play as a leisure activity. In fact, the line between play and work is so fine that even the gold farmers consider it difficult to identify. During his interviews with farmers, Dibbell was shocked to find that many gold farmers play the same games during their leisure time that they do at work. They spend hours collecting gold and other items during their working hours, only to return to computers and continue working during their free time. One explained this by telling him, "It's not all work. But there's not a big difference between play and work" (Dibbell 2007, online). This challenges the dichotomies of work versus play or labor versus leisure and suggests that these categories may not be neatly separable. Moreover, as I argue later, the blurring of these categories is an indication of how substantially the free market system has been reproduced in MMOGs.

Power leveling is another popular service that reveals the extent of exploitation in MMOGs. As with gold farming, players in Europe and North America pay companies in Asia for the service. However, unlike gold farming, players do not merely pay for virtual goods; they actually pay other people to play the game for them. Many MMORPGs rank characters' experience levels, giving them more experience points and making them more powerful as they complete more quests. Players pay power levelers to take over a game account and earn experience points or collect rare items. This allows players to elevate their characters to high levels much faster than if they played the game themselves. Thus, players who pay for a game and the monthly subscription fee that allows them to play online also pay other people to play the game for them. This is another industry based around the exploitation of labor and also another instance in which the

exploitation of labor in what is ostensibly a leisure activity blurs the distinction between work and play.

The gold farming and power leveling industries show the extent to which MMOGs reproduce real-world economic disparities, belying the medium's celebrated utopian possibilities. They also raise the question of why so many MMOG players are willing to outsource their play when it is supposed to be something enjoyable. This is a question that can best be answered by looking at the way MMOGs blur the line between work and play. Just as many gold farmers and power levelers spend their leisure time playing the same MMOGs that take up their working hours, the players who employ them spend much of their time in the MMOGs performing tasks that closely resemble work and that are often so onerous that they have to be delegated to professional players.

THE PROLONGATION OF WORK

"Play" in MMOGs is often a productive activity that defies conceptions of play as the opposite of work or as a sphere of life that exists beyond market logic. The play MMOG users engage in can be a way for them to produce real-world wealth, or, more commonly, it can be a simulation of productive activity that generates no wealth but that is so similar to productive work that it defies categorization as play. Ethnographic research has shown that many, if not most, players engage in work-like activities when pursuing their MMOGs entertainment (Taylor 2006; Yee 2006). Many users begin playing in MMOGs casually, exploring these spaces during their free time and using them as a refuge from the drudgeries of the real world. However, going beyond this initial experience often requires a more serious commitment. MMOGs are designed with reward systems, gradually increasing difficulty levels, and clear goals. These mechanisms lead players to enter a flow state, in which they are completely absorbed in the game, and encourage them to continue playing (Sweetser and Wyeth 2005). These mechanisms also help to ensure that players will continue paying the monthly subscription fees and participating in the market of virtual goods and services.

MMOG users spend an average of 20 hours a week in them (Yee 2006a). For many, play becomes like a second job (Kücklich 2005; Pearce 2006; Ruggill, McAllister, and Menchaca 2004; Yee 2006b). Reaching higher levels, earning money, and finding new items is often a matter of performing repetitive resource extraction. As Taylor explains, "players of all levels often talk about 'the grind,' which is the experience of going through painfully boring or rote gameplay with slow advancement" (Taylor 2006: 76). The only choice is to spend hours performing repetitive tasks or to pay others to grind through the unpleasant parts of the game. Many types of entertainment are both fun and demanding, but there is something exceptional about fun that becomes so laborious that it is frequently outsourced to others. People who engage in other physically and mentally demanding forms of play, such as hiking or weightlifting, generally do not pay others to carry out the activity for them. They may pay for assistance, such as by hiring a guide, but not for someone to perform the leisure activity as a proxy. By contrast, as I showed in the previous section, outsourcing play is so common in MMOGs that it has given rise to an entire industry of gold farmers and power levelers.

After completing the entry-level quests, many players find that their characters are not strong enough to continue playing by themselves, as higher level quests are designed to be too difficult for a single player to complete. The increased difficulty leads players to join guilds that complete quests together. It is once users join guilds that their experience of play in MMORPGs undergoes a major transformation—it begins to appear more like work. Guilds maintain standards of performance that drive members to spend considerable amounts of time online. In her study of *EverQuest* (EQ), Taylor quotes one guild's recruitment page as saying that "you must play more EQ than you spend time sleeping" (Taylor 2006, 48). Members who fail to devote enough time to the game are often expelled from the guild or find that they are so far behind other members that they have to work overtime to catch up to their progress. Even meeting performance standards can be an alienating experience, as many guilds place productivity above good relationships between members (Lindtner, Mainwaring, Dourish, and Wang 2009).

Studies of MMOGs have struggled to explain why so many people choose to play games, even when they may appear to be like second jobs. In "The Labor of Fun," Nick Yee approaches this topic by exploring the career options for players in *Star Wars Galaxies* (Yee 2006b). Like many MMOGs, it has a complex economy that is entirely player driven. Players choose a profession, then spend their time in the game producing virtual goods. To use Yee's example, a pharmaceutical manufacturer must hire other players to provide raw materials and to build factories, choose which products to make, set prices, and choose advertising strategies. This is a time-consuming process. "It takes about 3 to 6 weeks of normal game play to acquire the abilities and schematics to be competitive in the market, and the business operation thereafter requires daily time commitment" (Yee 2006b, 69). Thus, Yee concludes that MMORPGs often fail to function as leisure activities.

> The central irony of MMORPGs is that they are advertised as worlds to escape to after coming home from work, but they too make us work and burn us out. For some players, their game play might be more stressful and demanding than their actual jobs. And the most tragic irony is that MMORPG players pay game companies on a monthly basis (between

> US$10 and US$15) to work and get burned out. (Yee 2006b, 69)

Although Yee provides an excellent description of this phenomenon, he does not explain the mechanisms that blur the boundaries between work and play online or go into much detail about what this phenomenon tells us about the structure of MMOGs.

Rettberg takes a more direct approach to theorizing work and play online. He uses Max Weber's theory of the Protestant work ethic to explain why players eagerly engage in virtual labor (Rettberg 2008). However, despite its strengths, Weber's theory seems poorly suited for explaining labor in MMOGs. First, interest in MMOGs is not unique to Protestant countries. As the Chinese gold farmers show, Asian players, even those who earn their living in MMOGs, also perform virtual work during their leisure time. Moreover, MMOGs have millions of unpaid users throughout Asia. Second, Rettberg argues that players are motivated to work even when they play because of the Protestant aversion to wasting time (Rettberg 2008, 32); he claims that working during play time is a way of escaping the moral condemnation of idleness. However, this is also a problematic argument because gaming of any sort, whether or not it is productive, is widely considered a leisure activity and even a waste of time, especially by those who do not play video games but whose judgments still help to determine societal views of gaming.

Alternatively, the willingness to work in MMOGs might be explained as the result of psychological investment. Many players become heavily invested in their characters, to the point that they are extensions of a person's identity (Turkle 1997; Wolfendale 2007). One might argue that players submit to working during their free time because of their obligation to their virtual selves. However, this also seems to be an inadequate explanation. Psychological investment generally comes as a result of spending hours in MMOGs developing a character; it does not explain why players make the initial commitment to these characters even when the long-term costs of time and energy are clear. Additionally, players' willingness to turn over their personal accounts to strangers thousands of miles away in order for them to be power leveled indicates a lack of attachment, or at least that the desire for higher levels and more powerful items outweighs the risk of losing control of an account.

Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry thesis provides a more promising starting point for understanding the strange relationship between work and play in MMOGs and the reasons why MMOGs so often lose their potential to transcend the limitations of the status quo. Scholars have been reticent to apply the theory of the culture industry to new media. Gunster (2004, 10) says that it "has largely been met with an uncomfortable silence" in recent scholarship on critical theory. Some have also questioned the efficacy of the culture industry thesis in describing contemporary media and argued that it is only applicable to mass media like television, film, and music (Lash and Lury 2007). Nevertheless, Adorno (1991c, 160) considers that this theory is more broadly applicable and therefore makes it a point not to tie it to mass media or any particular technology. As the following sections argue, the culture industry thesis can be adapted to account for why MMOGs have so often become new sites for work and even for exploitation, rather than sites for exploring utopian possibilities.

THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

The culture industry thesis is largely a critique of the sameness of mass media such as movies, television, and popular music (Gunster 2000). Horkheimer and Adorno (1969) argue that culture industry media present standardized experiences that are the same for every viewer. They maintain that diversity of content in mass media is illusory. The variety of texts and superficial differences between them give the false appearance of uniqueness (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969). This sameness is a consequence of the economic system that produces these texts, distributes them, situates them with reference to other activities, and deprives them of the power to challenge the status quo. This system of industrial production creates cultural products for the sole purpose of exchange value and predetermines the content of individual texts (Adorno 1991a; 1991b). It also prepares people for consuming the culture industry's products. Productive labor exhausts workers and makes them incapable of putting effort into their leisure activities, thereby making them content with whatever entertainment the culture industry provides (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969).

MMOGs and other video games are likewise part of larger systems of media production and distribution (Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter 2009). They are often produced by large companies, connected to other products (Allison 2003), used as marketing platforms (Glass 2007; Winkler and Buckner 2006), and used for job recruitment (Michael 2006; Nieborg 2010). However, what is of particular interest is not the obvious fact that MMOGs are commodities but that these commodities reproduce the capitalist system of commodity production and exchange within the worlds they create. On the surface, MMOGs are different from the mass media that the culture industry thesis was originally directed at because they appear to be diverse, customizable, and partly shaped by the users themselves. Players are seemingly free to determine their character's appearance, attributes, and behavior. For instance, they can complete quests in various orders, join different guilds, associate with different online communities, and play the game using different strategies.

Nevertheless, as with the mass media texts that Adorno and Horkheimer criticize, MMOGs are characterized by deep structural similarities that persist despite the superficial variations in their settings and narratives. Virtual worlds and MMORPGs share many game-play mechanics, generally employ similar systems of character development, and tend to provide the same types of indications of character development (such as skill levels and happiness ratings). Most importantly of all, the economies of MMOGs are modeled on the free market systems of commodity production and exchange. MMOGs offer customization within the limited scope of worlds that are bound by the same types of economic relationships one finds in the real world. Thus, as in the mass media texts Horkheimer and Adorno discuss, the superficial variations in MMOGs generate the illusion of more substantive differences, an illusion that helps to conceal the fact that game worlds operate by the logic of the market system. MMOGs reproduce market activities like productive labor and even the exploitation of labor, while still appearing to be entertainment products that create worlds that are radically different from our own.

Another of the central elements of the culture industry thesis is that leisure is a continuation of work. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that "amusement in late capitalism is the prolongation of work" (1969, 137). They explain that amusement continues work not in the literal sense of involving the same activities but rather in the sense of being a stage in the process that makes work possible. Leisure activities appear to be the opposite of work, as I defined them at the outset, as they take place during the times when workers are not at their jobs and involve much different activities. However, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that leisure is functionally determined by relationships of exchange that structure economic life (Jay 1996). The apparent difference between work and leisure masks the fact that the contemporary form of leisure, which is generally seen as a diversion from work and amusement without effort or challenge, is a result of the alienating forms of work characteristic of contemporary economic life. As Horkheimer and Adorno see it, leisure is only rest in preparation for more work (Adorno 1991b). It is because work and play appear to be different activities that the latter can give workers the energy to return to their jobs while also giving them the illusion of fulfillment.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the apparent difference between the activities one performs at work and those at play is essential for preparing workers to return to the job ready to expend more labor power for someone else's profit. They conclude that play that exists for the sake of increasing a productive capacity should therefore be seen as an extension of work. As Adorno puts it, "Free time then does not merely stand in opposition to labour. In a system where full employment itself has become the ideal, free time is nothing more than a shadowy continuation of labour" (Adorno 1991b, 194). For this reason, leisure is defined by inattention and disorganization; it must be relatively effortless. Adorno (1991b) argues that in order to maintain the oppositional character of work, entertainment must always seem like something radically different from what is done during the working day. This is why it is so important for every leisure activity and every product of the culture industry to seem unique. Entertainment must appear to be unlike the standardized experience of work. Horkheimer makes a similar point by saying that private activities are only used for rest between periods of work (Horkheimer 1972). For Adorno and Horkheimer, meaningful entertainment requires effort and attention. It is a combination of work and play that cultivates an individual's skills and sensibilities, improving them through their activity. Such entertainment is difficult for workers to engage in, as they are generally too exhausted from overwork to devote their attention to enriching activities during free time.

In broad terms, the culture industry thesis provides an apt description of how leisure can serve as the extension of work, but applying it requires reworking and updating the theory in light of the facts I presented earlier. The resemblance of work and play in MMOGs challenges Adorno and Horkheimer's claims about the oppositional character of entertainment in the culture industry in at least two ways. First, MMOGs show that leisure time can be a continuation of work in a far more literal sense than Adorno and Horkheimer claim. Leisure can be not only an act of rest and recovery, as they see it, but also a new sphere for the production of exchange value in itself. Second, as the previous section explained, many players see their activities as work and not as a radical departure from the work they perform at their jobs. MMOGs work often looks like work. The oppositional character of leisure is lost, making it difficult to draw a distinction between work and play. MMOGs therefore show that entertainment does not have to mask itself as something opposed to work in order to serve as an extension of work activities, as Adorno and Horkheimer thought.

The diversionary entertainment of mass media and the often overtly laborious entertainment of MMOGs are driven by the same underlying phenomenon, though recognizing this characteristic in the latter requires that the culture industry thesis be updated. The mass media Adorno and Horkheimer describe, as well as MMOGs, are forms of entertainment that are based on the enjoyment of exchange value, which in turn facilitate production for exchange value. The former are produced for their exchange value and as means of preparing workers to return to their productive labor by offering them diversion (Adorno 1991a). By contrast, rather than providing an entertainment experience that is purely diversion, MMOGs

immerse players in systems of exchange that expand users' opportunities to consume. MMOGs not only permit everything to be commodified and exchanged but encourage this by making it a central part of gameplay. They reframe leisure activity as an extension of working life that is governed by the same rules, and they do this in a way that seems to empower players. Players can realize the promise of accumulating unlimited amounts of material wealth. Thus, instead of preparing users for more work, which is the function of culture industry mass media, MMOGs prepare players for more consumption. MMOGs are structured to encourage players to see their consumption as the primary means of self-expression and self-creation, as it is through these activities that they create their virtual selves.

As Adorno argues, the products of the culture industry fill a need for belonging. He explains this in Freudian terms, as the demand for libidinal energies to be released through socially approved means, which often means that gratification must be experienced through objects. Purchase and consumption provides a release of energy and also gives individuals the feeling of becoming part of something larger than themselves. This leads exchange value to supersede use value without consumers noticing the shift. Exchange becomes pleasurable in itself, even when it does not satisfy any real needs (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969). MMOGs exchange epitomizes this shift even better than the media Adorno and Horkheimer discuss. Because there is no necessity in MMOGs, all production and consumption are based on exchange value alone. MMOGs are driven by the endless drive for accumulation for its own sake. The characters that players create can be alienated to strangers for the purposes of accumulating more virtual wealth, even when players are deeply attached to their players, because outsourcing play allows users to succeed in accumulating more virtual wealth.

COMMODIFIED PLAY

As I pointed out in the first section, MMOGs have many positive characteristics. They expand the scope of free expression (Taylor 2006), make entertainment more personalized (Wolfendale 2007; Waggoner 2009), promote associational life (Schulzke 2011), and can serve educational goals (Gee 2007; Gee and Hayes 2010). Yet these characteristics are also the points at which the experience of MMOGs is often most clearly commodified. The result is that although these are positive dimensions of MMOGs, their critical potential is undermined as they are inscribed within the pervasive market logic. *Second Life*, one of the games that is often praised as a space of free expression of marginalized groups, offers a prime example of this. *Second Life* provides a highly customizable gameplay experience, allowing players to choose their race, sex, and sexual orientation. This has the potential to serve progressive purposes, as players can switch races and genders to gain some insight into other perspectives, and groups of players can then form their own communities based on these shared identities (Roberts and Parks 1999).

Nevertheless, players' free choices are not free of cost. Sexual expression is a prime example of this, as it is one of the most heavily commodified elements of the game. Players exchange real money for virtual currency that can be used to purchase more attractive body parts for their avatars. Avatars can engage in a wide variety of sexual acts, but these are performed as part of scripts that must be purchased (Brookey and Cannon 2009). Players can simulate everything from conventional sexual acts, which are purchased from virtual stores, to brutal rape fantasies that must be bought on *Second Life*'s black market. They must even pay for their avatars to appear naked. Thus, one of the elements of the game that seems to expand the scope of player freedom of action and expression is ultimately shaped by exchange relations. By commodifying sexuality and difference, *Second Life* ensures that the diversity that would challenge the enlightenment subsumption of particularity into universal categories is reduced to a market value. In other words, MMOGs have the capacity to facilitate progressive initiatives, but they commodify the progressive elements of the experience, thereby limiting their critical capacity.

To the extent that MMOGs simply reproduce the system of exchange that structures the real world, they, like all products of the culture industry, limit their critical potential. From a theoretical perspective, this is a great loss, yet from a consumer's perspective, it may be desirable. This is another of the great insights of the culture industry thesis. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that people are drawn to noncritical entertainment because it is comfortable. People want easy entertainment even when they see that its function is the continuation of work. As Adorno says, consumers "force their eyes shut and voice approval, in a kind of self-loathing, for what is meted out to them, knowing fully the purpose for which it is manufactured" (Adorno 1991b, 103). This is a shocking description of the experience of leisure activities, yet it coincides with statements made by players themselves. Ethnographic studies have revealed that players often describe feeling a compulsion to continue playing, even when they find their experience unpleasant (Chappell, Eatough, Davies, and Griffiths 2006; Griffiths 2003; Ng and Wiemer-Hastings 2005). Many even continue playing when aspects of their MMOGs experience become so onerous that players outsource their labor to others.

By taking part in an online market system that is like the one they experience in the real world, players do not experience the discomfort of a world radically unlike their own. They do not have to experience the tension between the real world and a critical utopia that challenges it. MMOGs

may be unpleasant to the extent that they demand repetitive, unfulfilling work, but they provide a pleasant affirmation of players' own worlds. The productive labor that MMOGs require is comfortable because it mirrors the real world and does not challenge players to imagine a place that is not structured by production for exchange. The need for affirmative entertainment is especially strong in MMOGs because players have a more active role in determining the content of MMOGs than consumers of other media. This gives players a much greater capacity for restructuring the entertainment according to their personal wishes, but it also makes the task of imagining an alternative space more difficult. Rather than simply experiencing such a place, users would have to participate in it and help create it.

Socialization also has a role in determining the structure of MMOGs. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that individuals who are socialized into a capitalist system are so heavily influenced by it that they internalize its values and find comfort in affirming them (Cook 1996). Adorno uses the story of Robinson Crusoe to illustrate how socialization drives people to sacrifice their chances at greater freedom. He says that Crusoe was fortunate to leave the bourgeois world, but that he missed that world so much that he recreated it for himself (Adorno 1991d). He had the opportunity to start fresh in a tropical paradise, unencumbered by the world he departed from, yet he only tried to reproduce the old world in a different context. This story, Adorno explains, shows that "reality becomes its own ideology through the spell cast by its faithful duplication" (Adorno 1991d, 63). Horkheimer shares this view, as he thinks that the culture industry is driven by a reciprocal process in which individuals affirm the values they have been trained to accept. "The patterns of thought and action that people accept as ready-made from the agencies of mass culture act in their turn to influence mass culture as though they were the ideas of the people themselves" (Horkheimer 2003, 154). In other words, people are conditioned to see their own ways of life as the only possible ways of life, making it difficult to start anew even when presented with a blank slate on which to build any form of life imaginable. In this respect the culture industry thesis has some affinities with Althusser's theory of interpellation,[1] despite Adorno and Horkheimer's commitment to the type of humanist Marxist that Althusser opposed (Althusser 2003). The unique strength of the culture industry thesis is that it builds on this point of agreement to explain why people would actively seek out entertainment that is ideologically structured.

The desire for comfortable entertainment and the effects of socialization that Horkheimer and Adorno discuss in their work on the culture industry help to account for why so many players are willing participants in MMOGs economies even when the activities they perform are laborious. Their entertainment may be so similar to work as to be indistinguishable from it, yet it is a comfortable work in the sense that it is psychologically comforting. It affirms the values of the players' societies. Like Robinson Crusoe, players find themselves in the position to create new worlds. These worlds show a great deal of imagination and creativity, but they invariably reproduce familiar institutions and ways of life. The fact that this pattern has been repeated many times is evidence of how difficult it is to overcome this tendency. Outsourcing play to wage laborers in other countries is a natural extension of this. It is only natural for MMOGs that mirror the real world's economic system to also reproduce the same practices of delegating the most unpleasant work to those who will perform it for the lowest wages.

CONCLUSION

The culture industry thesis provides a strong starting place for theorizing work in MMOGs, as it helps to explain the structures that determine the content of these worlds, why so many players choose to work even during their leisure time, and how play can give rise to new kinds of wage labor exploitation. It also reveals what is lost when MMOGs recreate the real world's relations of production. MMOGs have enormous critical potential, yet this potential goes partially unrealized as these worlds continue to be structured in the model of capitalist market systems that make endless accumulation the central objective of play. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the tragedy of the culture industry is that it affirms the status quo by recreating it, rather than challenging the status quo, transcending it in spaces that are radically different. Culture should, they argue, serve the negative function of challenging the society and its institutions. To the extent that MMOGs reproduce the market system, they not only affirm it but also increase its scope by introducing new realms of work and exploitation.

I have emphasized the culture industry thesis as a counterpoint to more optimistic assessments of the benefits and progressive functions of MMOGs. However, it is important to recognize that part of the reason the culture industry thesis functions effectively in this capacity is that the theory has its own bias of reading media in ways that emphasize their market and ideological functions at the expense of other aspects of media. Adorno and Horkheimer overlooked the many potential benefits of the media they analyzed and can be justifiably criticized on this basis. For this reason, the culture industry thesis is best employed as one perspective on MMOGs, a perspective that can explicate how MMOGs fall short of their utopian potential when they are used to reproduce free market economic systems, but that is poorly suited to recognizing the potential benefits of MMOGs. The culture industry thesis is therefore best seen as a way of exposing and challenging

the limitations of MMOGs and other new media, without being endorsed wholesale as providing a complete account of these media.

Although this essay's focus has been on the failure of MMOGs to live up to their potential as critical devices, it is important to avoid falling into the same skepticism Horkheimer and Adorno showed toward new media. As Bronner points out, one of the central failings of the culture industry thesis is that it overlooks the diversity of aesthetic products by placing analysis of the form of media over that of content (Bronner 2002: 154). This is also the mistake many have found in Adorno's infamous attack on jazz, in which he condemned the entire genre on the basis of a few pieces of music (Harding 1995; Nesbitt 1999). Adorno and Horkheimer are so convinced that the culture industry effaces all radical potential from its products that they commit the fault that they associate with the enlightenment—that of privileging the universal concept over particularity. They assume that all products of a particular form will lack a critical component. This is a mistake that cannot be repeated when applying the culture industry thesis to new media, especially to MMOGs.

MMOGs are so malleable that they always leave open the possibility that they might be restructured or that a new one might be created to challenge users to think more critically. For this to be possible, MMOGs must first overcome the problem of reproducing familiar relations of production and their corresponding forms of economic exploitation and instead strive to construct radically different places that explore alternative systems of social and economic organization. They can recover their utopian potential to the extent that they become spaces for exploring alternative systems of social and economic organization. These alternatives need not always function effectively and may not be transferrable to the real world, but breaking away from the tendency of producing new worlds that mirror our own is an important step toward thinking more directly about what aspects of our world are contingent and what aspects should be reconsidered.

NOTE

1. Interpellation refers to the way ideology helps to constitute the identities of those who are hailed by it, thereby limiting the possibility of imaging alternatives outside of the ideological space (Althusser, 1971).

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