Westminster Advanced Studies
Issue No. 8

One-Dimensional Creativity in the Video Game Industry: Towards a Marcusean Critique of Play

Ergin Bulut

Westminster Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Westminster. London, UK. ebulut@ku.edu.tr

WESTMINSTER INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

UNIVERSITY OF
SPACE
TO THINK
WESTMINSTER

Westminster Advanced Studies is a research papers series that presents independent critical thinking and advanced insights into the complex realities and possibilities of the contemporary world.

Published by Westminster Institute for Advanced Studies (WIAS)

Editor: Prof Christian Fuchs, WIAS Director
Editorial Assistant: Denise Rose Hansen, WIAS EA
westminster.ac.uk/wias
wias.ac.uk

Date of publication: 23 August 2017

One-Dimensional Creativity in the Video Game Industry: Towards a Marcusean Critique of Play

Ergin Bulut

Westminster Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Westminster. London, UK. ebulut@ku.edu.tr

Abstract: This article integrates Herbert Marcuse's historical critique of one-dimensionality with video game studies from a political-economic perspective. The article first introduces Marcuse's central concepts—surplus repression, the performance principle—and discusses them in relation to the eroticization of work and revival of play in the video game industry. Then, drawing on the insights from a 2.5-year fieldwork in a medium-sized game studio in the US, I introduce the term "one-dimensional creativity" to describe the work practices in the triple-A section of the transnational video game industry. One-dimensional creativity is a form of creativity that superficially eliminates the reality principle in the name of the pleasure principle but finds itself restrained to the limits of corporatized production for which creativity only counts when it helps increase profits. Despite claims of openness and horizontality, this one-dimensional creativity is still framed by a technological rationality. The industry's one-dimensional creativity does give game developers the opportunity to express themselves but it is also a kind of creativity of contradictions since this one-dimensional creativity negates other potential forms of creativity that could possibly emerge outside the hit-driven logics of the industry. Ultimately, through "one-dimensional creativity," I critique the instrumentalization of play in the industry, and deconstruct the conservative production and design principles of triple-A game production—a production that is structured heavily by technological performance, better graphics, interactivity, speed, and machinic performance. Multi-dimensional video game play, I suggest, is more likely to come from the independent game production scene that is more able to be dedicated to game narratives and aesthetics outside the logics of one-dimensionality, thereby challenging the affirmative culture that is dominant in the triple-A game production.

Keywords: Herbert Marcuse, one-dimensionality, video games, immaterial labor, play, industry studies, surplus repression

Acknowledgement: This working paper was written as part of the International Research Fellowship programme at the Westminster Institute for Advanced Studies (WIAS), University of Westminster, London, UK.

1. Introduction

The late 1960s and early 1970s constituted a global moment of rebellion mediated through "a counterculture of psychedelic drugs and of political dissent" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 9). Across the world, young people protested against educational institutions, bureaucracy and the working lives of their parents, that were all structured by monopoly capitalism. They collectively targeted the one-dimensional organization of work institutions and bureaucratically controlled, impersonal labor processes lacking a rejuvenating spirit. The alienating and deskilling organization of factory labor and its similar implementations in the office (Braverman 1974) looked unappealing to younger generations of the 1960s even when hard work was compensated by consumption opportunities beyond the workplace.

Around the same years, the US military-industrial complex was giving birth to the video game industry in its embryonic form. The earliest video games such as *Tennis for Two* or *Spacewar*, however, were not *simply* the products of an "individual genius". Rather, they were the historical outcomes of the Cold War, during which scientists tasked by the US to undermine the Soviet Union simply created and played during moments of boredom at work. It did not take long for the game industry, specifically and primarily Atari, to reterritorialize the ludic and participatory experiences of the Cold War's computer science nerds into its capitalist circuits throughout the 1970s.

Prior but temporally close to these countercultural and technologically innovative developments, a number of important intellectual developments were unfolding in the world of critical theory. At the center stood the New Left's "guru" in the US: Herbert Marcuse (Funke, Lamas & Wolfson 2017, 3). In this article, I provide a Marcusean critique of the spirit and practice of play in the video game industry, specifically triple-A game production[1]. Based on my 2.5-year fieldwork in a medium-sized studio (pseudonym: Magic) in the US[2], I discuss play in relation to a) time (flexible work schedule) and space (playful workplace) and b) video game testing. Regarding the former, I ask: What are the implications for play when a workplace is turned into a playground that is governed by a flexible work environment policy where game developers are required to come to the studio for only two hours a day? In the case of video game testing, I revisit the concept of "degradation of fun" (Bulut 2015) and deconstruct the imagination of testing as a "dream job" where the dream is demystified due to instrumentalization and quantification of play, which together lead to diminishing of pleasure and "contamination" of pure play. In both cases, I engage with Herbert Marcuse's concepts of "surplus repression," "performance principle" and de-

[1] Triple-A games are high-budget productions created with the participation of large teams comprised of hundreds of game developers that usually operate in globally networked spaces. Triple-A games are commonly called the "blockbusters" of the game industry.

[2] My fieldwork took place between 2010-2013. In this period, I engaged in participant observation in a medium-sized US game studio and interviewed 56 individuals, including artists, testers, producers, designers, programmers, human resources staff, and the partners of game developers. When I started this project, Magic employed more than 230 employees but at the time I concluded my ethnography this number had shrunken to less than 190. I have discussed the precarious working conditions at Magic elsewhere (Bulut 2015).

scribe the work practices at Magic as what I call "one-dimensional creativity." Clearly derived from Marcuse's ideological critique of the advanced industrial society's "one-dimensional" way of thinking, working, and living, "one-dimensional creativity" refers mainly to the triple-A game production's conservative production and design principles. These are not only heavily structured by the profit-maximization but are also framed mostly—and primarily—by technological virtuosity materialized in the industry's fetishized discourses on more realist graphics, interactivity, speed, and machinic performance. In that regard, this article uniquely deploys Marcuse beyond his ideology critique and applies his work to the question of play, as well as fields of video game studies and creative industry studies.

One-dimensional creativity is a productive concept for several reasons. First, it undermines the mainstream creativity discourse and demonstrates how it operates on exclusionary premises, mostly prioritizing technological performance of high-technology machines, highly educated populations, and gentrified urban spaces within advanced capitalist countries (Ross 2007). Following from this is the more important intervention that "one-dimensional creativity" makes. Drawing on the work of Chris Gibson, Chantel Carr, and Andrew Warren (2015), I argue that even critical media scholars have reproduced a somewhat elitist notion of creativity by simply focusing on the Global North. That is, our notion of creativity is a political construct derived from policy circles and it seems that even we tend to associate creativity with intellectual property production and marginalize material production as "uncreative." In that regard, the concept of "one-dimensional creativity" enables us to see not only the racialized and gendered infrastructure of video game production, but also the everyday creativity, skills, and value of workers in manufacturing regions of the world that make high-resolution and networked game experiences possible. In other words, creativity needs to be democratized beyond the "genius designer/producer" model fetishized in trade journals and also increasingly in educational institutions (Mayer 2011; Mayer, Banks & Caldwell 2009; Banks 2009).

This holistic, egalitarian, and transnational understanding of creativity takes us to why Marcuse's work would be valuable for critically understanding work practices in the game industry. First, it was Marcuse who, during the 1960s, called for a "catalyst" for social revolution, which would include students, people of color, and women (Forman 2017). In other words, the struggle for a just world has to be transnational by nature and so do we need to conceptualize creativity along those transnational terms. Second, to the best of my knowledge, with the exception of Sara Grimes and Andrew Feenberg's work where they refer to the work of Marcuse (2009) and Christian Fuchs's application of Marcuse's theory of play to Facebook (Fuchs 2016, 128), neither creative industry studies nor game studies scholars have considered his insights as to how we can think about play and work. Moreover, except for a few notable scholars (Yee 2006; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009; Nakamura 2009; Kerr 2011; Lund 2014), game studies literature still suffers from a fetishism of participation and are still relatively indifferent to the production dynamics of the game industry. And even though there has been a sustained engagement with Marcuse in critical theory (Kellner 1984; Wolin 2001; Feenberg 2005), critical information and media

studies (Fuchs 2017), as well as a recent revival of his work in social movements literature (Lamas, Wolfson, and Funke 2017), examination of Marcuse's work regarding the political economy of game production is overdue. In the remaining sections, I first historically discuss Marcuse's key concepts, including surplus repression and the performance principle. Then, I examine Magic's attempts to create an affective and flexible workplace in which work and play coalesce, particularly in the case of game testing. This part is followed by a discussion of the implications of such practices around what I call "one-dimensional creativity." Conclusion will follow.

2. Herbert Marcuse's Invitation for Play

Similar to other members of the Frankfurt School, it would be appropriate to contextualize Marcuse's work as a critical attempt to address the crisis of Marxism in the 1920s, 1930s and onwards. The reactionary behavior of the working classes and a scientific, indoctrinated, and economistic approach towards Marxism, which failed to foresee the Russian revolution, overall forced philosophers like Marcuse to reconstruct Marxist philosophy not as an ideology but "a fallibilistic method of historical understanding" (Wolin 2001, 143).

Two aspects of Marxism's crisis as addressed by Marcuse are of particular concern for us here. The first one concerns scientific Marxism's obsession with controlling nature through technical knowledge. The second and related aspect concerns the productivist approach towards labor held by certain strands of Marxism. For Marcuse, the value of Marxism was derived not from replicating bourgeois political economy's reified formulations regarding human labor but its ability to deconstruct such categories and recuperate labor as a source of self-realization. It is in especially in "On the Philosophical Foundations of the Concept of Labor in Economics" that Marcuse works towards an anthropological definition and moves away from his attempts to reconcile Heidegger with Marx. Along the lines of Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*, Marcuse argued that it is through labor that "one first becomes "for oneself" what one is, comes to one's self, acquires the form of one's Dasein, winning one's "permanence" and at the same time making the world "one's own" (Marcuse 1973, 11) but under the historical conditions of capitalism, conditions for practicing free labor are not there yet:

> "In laboring, the laborer is always "with the thing": whether one stands by a machine, draws technical plans, is concerned with organizational measures, researches scientific problems, instructs people etc. in his activity, he allows himself to be directed by the thing, subjects himself and obeys its laws, even when he dominates his object, directs it, guides it, and lets it go its own way" (Marcuse 1973, 25).

Yet, as Richward Wolin (2001, 157) insightfully argues, Marcuse's essay becomes innovative not in relation to labor but to play, by way of inspiration from Friedrich Schiller, who wrote: "Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly Man when he is playing" (Schiller 1965, 80; cited in Wolin). Following Schiller's lead, Marcuse pushed towards the idea of play as the complete opposite of labor, since it had the potential of being virtuous, devoid of practical necessities.

> In play, the objectivity of objects and their effects, and the actuality of the objective world with which one is usually forced constantly to deal, thus learning to respect it, are temporarily suspended. For once, one does entirely as one pleases with objects; one places oneself beyond them and becomes "free" from them. This is what is decisive: in this self-positing transcendence of objectivity one comes precisely to oneself, in *a dimension of freedom denied in labor*. In a single toss of a ball, the player achieves an infinitely greater triumph over objectification than in the most powerful accomplishment of technical labor" (emphasis is mine).

Marcuse's engagement with play in this essay lays the groundwork for his future works, especially *Eros and Civilization* (Marcuse 1955). *Eros and Civilization* represents Marcuse's attempt to read Freud against Freud in order to rescue the pessimistic reading of the human psyche and to argue that repression is not inevitable. At the center of Marcuse's critique of Freud—just like his critique of his mentor Heidegger's timeless categories—was his historical approach towards society. In Marcuse's thinking, domination of particular groups or repression of instincts were not independent from historical formations and were therefore subject to change. As he argued, "this argument [Freud's argument regarding the dominance of reality principle], which looms large in Freud's metapsychology, is fallacious in so far as it applies to the brute fact of scarcity what actually is the consequence of a specific organization of scarcity, and of a specific existential attitude enforced by this organization" (Marcuse 1955, 36). The reality principle's continued dominance was not inevitable, especially because the affluent society no longer had to be structured by scarcity thanks to technological advancements. The kind of scarcity underpinning modern economy was artificial, and modern technology had reached a level where the need for what Marcuse called "surplus repression" and "performance principle" —two concepts he coined to historicize domination in Marxian lines to critique Freud—could be over.

Curiously, without strictly using Marxian categories, Marcuse defined surplus repression as different from "basic repression", since for Marcuse, there was not just one universal reality principle but "various historical forms of the reality principle" (1955, 35). And under capitalism, a particular form of domination different from the general rationality of authority had emerged. Rationality of authority existed in all societies whereas domination, according to Marcuse, "is exercised by a particular group or individual in order to sustain and enhance itself in a privileged position.

Such domination does not exclude technical, material, and intellectual progress, but only as an unavoidable by-product while preserving irrational scarcity, want, and constraint" (1955, 34). It was then the additional forms of control that derived from the specificities of capitalist domination—i.e. wage labor, working day, regimentation of work and leisure etc. —that he called "surplus-repression". The performance principle, on the other hand, was "the prevailing historical form of the reality principle" (Marcuse 1955, 35). It was intrinsically tied to "surplus-repression" and had more to do with the societal compulsion to work, compete, and perform a productive citizenship regarding both production and consumption. Marcuse wrote:

> For the vast majority of the population, the scope and mode of satisfaction are determined by their own labor; but their labor is work for an apparatus which they do not control, which operates as an independent power to which individuals must submit if they want to live (1955, 45).

Clearly following a Marxian path of explanation, Marcuse further suggested that "the basic control of leisure is achieved by the length of the working day itself, by the tiresome and mechanical routine of alienated labor" (1955, 47). Due to performance principle, even our free time was not completely available for pleasure, thereby leading to the agitation of the pleasure principle. Perpetuating the performance principle was technology. Not dissimilar to Walter Benjamin's critique of modern linear progress, Marcuse implicitly argued that we did not actually need more production or technology to solve social problems. It was technology's ontological framework, linked with the performative principle, that produced our problems. Therefore, for Marcuse, artistic imagination, phantasy, play, reduction of work time and termination of alienated labor would pave the way for a society based on pleasure. There would still be need for the reality principle as to do the necessary work for survival. Nevertheless, the performance principle and the notion of surplus repression would be abolished in his conceptualization of a free society that would be accomplished through what he called "the Great Refusal," which would ultimately produce a new form of subjectivity that was constantly underlined during the 1960s.

In his 1998 preface to *Eros and Civilization*, Douglas Kellner emphasizes how Marcuse's "emphasis on liberation, play, love, and eros anticipated the ethos of the 1960s counterculture" (1955/1998, xi). It seems that the 1960s call for the recovery of the pleasure principle has been effectively turned into a form of joyous labor that fuels the transnational video game industry, an industry worth more than 100 billion dollars in global revenues, excluding hardware and second-hand game sales (Kerr 2017, 2). Therefore, I ask: Is the video game industry, which undermines the strict regimentation of the working day by fusing work with pleasure and play, somewhat a Marcusean dream realized? Are the game industry workers, who mostly love what they do (Tokumitsu 2015), harbingers of multi-dimensional subjectivities as opposed to the one-dimensionality critiqued by Marcuse? On the surface, one's answer might be "yes" but a deeper examination reveals how the industry has not completely been able to bring pleasure back to work as imagined by Marcuse. The two illuminating

moments below—playful space and flexible work environment, playtesting as a form of playbor (Kucklich 2009)—will demonstrate how "degradation of fun" (Bulut 2015) is an indispensable concept to critically understand and theorize labor practices in the industry, encapsulated by "one-dimensional creativity."

3. Capitalism's "New Spirit" at Magic: Eroticization of the Work-Place, Revival of Play at Work

In their extensive work on Post-Fordism's management culture, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005, 8) argue that capitalism owes its legitimacy partly to its "spirit," which they define as "the ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism". For a spirit of capitalism to be successful, it needs to "engage" subjects and make capitalism "attractive." In addition to being engaging and attractive, capitalism has to be good at absorbing the criticism of its enemies in order to survive. As they write:

> We are going to assign critique the role of a motor in changes in the spirit of capitalism … it needs its enemies, people whom it outrages and who are opposed to it, to find the moral supports it lacks and to incorporate mechanisms of justice whose relevance it would otherwise have no reason to acknowledge (2005, 27).

In Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005, 174) account, capitalism was able to survive the crisis of Fordism because it managed to absorb the artistic critique of social movements of the 1960s. This had aimed to replace "the loss of autonomy, the absence of creativity… compulsory work schedules, prescribed tasks, the Taylorist separation between design and execution" with "autonomy, self-management, and the promise of an unbounded liberation of human creativity"—a discourse borrowed from "the repertoire of the festival, play". As documented by others (Turner 2009; Ross 2003; Neff, Wissinger & Zukin 2005), creative and high-tech industries have in general adopted this formula, which is reminiscent of Marcuse's call for eroticizing work. And as a member of the video game industry, an industry that epitomizes such material practices and embodies them in the very construction of the workplace, Magic is no exception in reviving play at work and aestheticizing labor.

My first meeting with Magic's developers took place in a theatre. Magic's workers had gathered to discuss work-related issues and evaluate their market position. Yet there was more to this meeting. Successful developers were given awards based on their annual achievements in the spirit of a spectacular Oscar ceremony. The event did not simply consist of the announcement of their names and the delivery of awards. Photoshopped images of developers were projected on a screen, giving rise to laughter and applause, inviting active participation within an eroticized context of work. The management's deliberate attempt to create an eroticized workplace can be revealed through an analysis of a) the flexible work schedule, and b) the affective construction and experience of space.

Magic's introduction of a flexible temporality through what they called "a flex-

ible work environment policy" (FWE) was a response to two problems in the studio: crunch and over-communication. Regarding the issue of "crunch", previous periods of overwork had negatively impacted the game developers' well-being. The management initiated a flexible work schedule to alleviate the burden of crunch. Regarding over-communication, the management considered holding too many meetings an obstacle to productivity, and chose to follow the new path of a "flexible work schedule" where the task of constantly monitoring the workers would be off the checklist.

However, it would be a mistake to approach FWE simply in negative terms. The actual reason behind FWE, which only required developers to be at the studio for two hours a day and allowed them to do things like jogging during work hours, had more to do with capital's desire to harness the productive capacities of Magic's immaterial workforce (Lazzarato 1996). The management insistently underlined the following in our conversations:

> How do you stick that [creativity] into a 9-5 job, [a] 40-hour [a] week job? It doesn't work in my mind… People have creative moments. They might have them [at] home; they might have them anywhere. We want to keep that. We want to enjoy that. At the same time, we have to also make sure that dependencies and communication happen.

Management's response to the problem of capitalizing on creative moments also has a spatial dimension. Therefore, Magic has specifically been built as an affective workplace to mobilize the emotions of game developers at work. Decidedly different from the cubicle regime, Magic welcomes its workers and visitors as a free and open "playbor" space (Kücklich 2009) in order to ease collaboration and boost productivity. The moment you step in, the studio salutes you with a bright display of its awards, previous games, trophies and historical achievements. Comfort, light, and latest technological equipment abound at Magic to facilitate creativity. Similar to Google, free food including adult beverages are indispensable to Magic's culture. As one walks through the corridors and the kitchen, it is not uncommon to run into developers enjoying free food, discussing work, or at times being involved in nerf-gun fights. Magic also offers moments for inspiration through its book and game libraries. Affective design is not simply about making work more enjoyable, however. Play in its pure form also exist at the studio. During lunch time or regular work hours, Magic's workers play console games, board games or card games. After all, as one developer said, "it's a place to go and stay all day… They [video game producers] want more than the cubicle walls."

Such ludic moments of laughter and pleasure are especially prominent in the work culture of Magic's testers, or quality assurance (QA) workers. Testers are fundamentally different from the core development group (designers, artists, programmers) and provide support for the core creatives. Despite repetitive tasks being involved, a central task of testers is to "debug" games from which they derive an intellectual gratification, even though they do not get to "play" and interact with the core developers as much. Still, despite their second-class status in the industry (Bulut

2015; Briziarelli 2016), their labor, derived from their valorized play skills (Charrieras & Roy-Valex 2008), is crucial for our smooth game experiences on TV screens. More importantly, video game testing epitomizes the crystallization of the fusion of work and play as far as video game production is concerned. And although popular imagination regarding game testing is "So, your job requires you to play games at work", reality is much different.

First, the gigantic scope of triple-A games in terms of code, graphics, and art requires the collaboration of a variety of testers working on different features of games, including art, standards and compliance, and multiplayer, meaning that testing is serious business. Second, despite the laid-back culture in the workplace, the testing department has its own leads and managers who monitor not only the productivity levels but also the attitudes of game testers towards workplace codes. Third, testing is a highly precarious position since the number of full-time positions for testing is limited and temporary testers are hired only when a particular project ramps up and are then laid off when they are no longer needed. Precarity is further exacerbated due to the large reserve army of testers.

Still, precarity is no obstacle to the cool perception of the job. A tester (Andy, previously full-time but now temporary) once said to me: "I would take a worse paying and awful job in [the] game development industry over a job having nothing to do with game development." One cannot help but consider Andy's commitment to play through the ways in which Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) discuss the question of commitment to work under different periods of capitalism. Commitment to precarious testing is sustained mainly in two ways. First, game testing is a symbolically valuable job that allows young people to do an exciting job: playing video games. Second, testers are often passionate gamers who are trained within the ludic regime of interactive consoles. Not only is play a pedagogical and embodied terrain for cultivating ardent player-workers (Yee 2006; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009) but also a very productive skill (Charrieras and Roy-Valex 2008) to possess as a tester. Then the question becomes: How can we critically understand the ways in which Magic has "creatively" eroticized the workplace and revived play at work where even the studio's most precarious citizens still desire a wage relationship with the real owners of intellectual property? What critical lexicon, if any, can we deploy through the work of Marcuse?

4. Instrumentalization of Pleasure, Degradation of Fun, and One-Dimensional Creativity

Building on the game industry's historical reliance on the fusion of work and pleasure, Magic has "eroticized" the workplace by introducing elements of freedom, flexibility, and openness. It has successfully succeeded in rationalizing the pleasure principle and instrumentalizing it for surplus value creation. As opposed to Marcuse's advanced industrial society in which search for pleasure had to be limited to our spare time, pleasure defines the essence of Magic. Developers are invited to enjoy themselves as they work. Magic's workers are no longer required to repress pleasure

but rather to perpetually cultivate it in the workplace and draw on it. It is no longer that the reality principle sublates the pleasure principle. Rather, the pleasure principle has almost become the universal sign at Magic. In sum, Eros in the game industry is not destructive. It is actually productive and that is why it is valuable.

Although the pleasure principle is unleashed through a seemingly trust-based relationship that defines Magic's construction as a flexible and affective workplace, in reality, a gift-giving practice between the management and its developers is taking place. The gift from the management is freedom, but neither freedom nor pleasure is free. Something is regarded as a gift only when it is not named as such and is beyond reciprocity (Walker 2011). The gift exchange at Magic, however, is mediated through wage labor. Then, the affective spatiality and flexible temporality at Magic does not correspond to an unrestrained form of unleashing creative pleasures and free play. Rather, cultivation of creativity and openness depends strictly on responsible developers' ability to deliver. Openness and collaboration are good only insofar as they conform to a particular regime of accumulation. The pleasure principle is unleashed only to the extent that the reality principle of value creation is ensured. In that regard, the abundant freedom and Magic's celebration of flexible creativity is an administered form of gift (Walker 2011, 370). After all, the management has underlined how they "have to also make sure that dependencies and communication happen" in relation to the FWE.

And that brings the dichotomy at the heart of Magic. If the 1960s nonconformist dream of openness and creativity comes to define the soul of the video game industry, can we possibly speculate whether such creativity and openness, in its highly corporatized and administered form, actually have come to represent the one-dimensionality of our times, despite the contrary claims? What does it mean when almost every creative workplace claims difference and uniqueness by adhering to fairly similar recipes for productivity?

"If the one-dimensional man of the 1950s believed all was well, the 21st century one-dimensional man and woman believe there is no alternative to the privatization of everything," writes Michael Forman (2017) in his discussion of how Marcuse's theorization has remained mostly relevant despite global political-economic changes. Along this argument, I that suggest extending Marcuse's critique of the advanced industrial society—one-dimensionality—might be productive to think about work practices in the game industry. As opposed to industrial labor or cubicle-office work, conformity in the game industry is ensured not through hierarchical repression based on boundaries but through openness and a regime of what I call "one-dimensional creativity", a form of creativity that superficially eliminates the reality principle in the name of the pleasure principle but finds itself restrained to the limits of corporatized production for which creativity only counts when it helps increase profits. Despite claims of openness and horizontality, this one-dimensional creativity is still framed by a technological rationality, "a form of rationality that grasps its objects on purely functional terms without presupposing any goal except its own application and extension" (Feenberg 2017, 232). The industry's one-dimensional creativity does give game developers the opportunity to express themselves but it is also a kind of creativity of

contradictions, since this one-dimensional creativity negates other potential forms of creativity that could possibly emerge outside the hit-driven logics of the industry. When one looks at the workplace and the labor process at Magic, the reality principle seems to be eliminated but the pleasure principle is exalted only for more "realistic" graphics or profit maximization. Even though the labor process at Magic is far from a "totally administered" one, it is still a highly administered one that is subject to the rules of the market, the dictates of the console cycles, and the dynamics of perpetual innovation. The kind of creativity fetishized at Magic is a reified one that restrains aesthetics to economic value and technological performance.

Additionally, one-dimensional creativity has implications in relation to time. While the dream of the 1960s was to maximize free time, Magic makes working time flexible to the extent that work becomes endless, in what the Autonomist Marxists famously called the "social factory" and its contemporary manifestations (Gregg 2011). Pleasure seems to rule but the reality principle and self-control are never dead. As one developer explained, he faced difficulties in adjusting to FWE: "it required me to exercise more self-control because I technically didn't have to get into work until 3 pm." The supposedly overthrown technological rationality only comes back in through what Gilles Deleuze (1992) called "societies of control" in which logic of profit maximization is only rendered more playful and less bureaucratic. Less bureaucracy, however, does not mean that pleasure derived from playful creativity is experienced equally across different sections of the workforce. That is, the core creatives such as programmers, designers, artists are offered more space and time to enjoy pleasure in the studio than the testers, who painfully experience instrumentalization of play through "degradation of fun" (Bulut 2015), thereby rendering the "coolness" of game development less tenable (McGuigan 2012).

Drawing inspiration from the works of labor scholar Harry Braverman (1974) and prominent Frankfurt School theorists (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944/2010), "degradation of fun" refers to how joy derived from video game testing is diminished simply because play becomes instrumentalized through time discipline and specific tasks. Apart from very obvious reasons, such as precarity and long working hours, "degradation of fun" takes place due to mainly two interlinked reasons: instrumentalization and quantification. Instrumentalization and quantification of play together produce "degradation of fun."

First, as opposed to free play, play within game testing is instrumentalized and subject to tasks that need to be completed during a certain period of time. Even though game testers look like they are just playing video games, they need to "put what you are doing in words", or else they are "just playing," a tester told me. Instrumentalization of play also leaks beyond the workplace in that testers start playing games in order to improve their employability and catch up with the industry. Play for play's sake is over.

Second, play in the industry is measured and surveilled. Specifically, in contrast to the claims regarding the immeasurability of immaterial labor, the number of bugs one can detect during testing are quantified through software. There is a number of bugs that testers are expected to find in the game depending on the status of

the project. Quantification is also possible through play in that fellow testers compete against each other to see who finds more bugs at the end of the workday. Then, despite its seemingly evasive and playful nature, the kind of (im)material labor game testing involves is measurable (Hearn 2010; Dowling 2007).

How does degradation of fun look like, if play becomes instrumentalized and quantified? Some game-testers don't "even wanna look at a computer screen" whereas others feel that the biggest downside of playbor is that it "changes the way you play video games." Testers also underline how play-testing turns them into game critics where they find themselves criticizing the games they play rather than simply enjoying them. Playing video games outside work becomes a lot harder. Despite its potentials to be a remedy to disenchantment at work, play, through instrumentalization, becomes a source of leisurely disenchantment when it becomes work-like. Quantification tears play into its parts and destroys play's magical qualities.

Given these critiques, how do we think about play and time? As Caroline Edwards (2013, 1) suggests, part of Marcuse's struggle in *Eros and Civilization* is focused on "the temporal dialectic between alienated labor time and the timelessness of pleasure's desire for eternity" and Marcuse's utopian project was partly to maximize time for pleasure. However, when we examine the form of play as it unfolds in testing, it's not that Magic has made play time infinite. Rather, Magic has valorized a supposedly wasteful activity: play. And when playing games becomes one's job, it has implications for free time and play itself, both of which are contaminated. Marcuse himself defined labor time as painful time. In the case of Magic's testers, free time too becomes somewhat painful since gratification from play during free time disappears. How a tester passes time outside work through play is fundamentally transformed. Restrictions on Eros at work are lifted, but this somewhat kills Eros outside the workplace.

Is play, in its degraded, instrumentalized, and quantified form, still play? According to Marcuse (1955, 187) "the play impulse does not aim at playing 'with' something; rather it is the play of life itself, beyond want and external compulsion—the manifestation of an existence without fear and anxiety, and thus the manifestation of freedom itself." For the play element in game testing to be completely free, the necessity for "external compulsion" has to be eliminated. The answer is not different for theorists of play, either. Despite some differences, major theorists of play have mostly agreed on the definition of play as free and voluntary activity. Huizinga (1944, 13), for instance, defined play as "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." On similar terms, Roger Caillois wrote that "A game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play," and added: players should be "free to leave whenever they please, by saying: "I'm not playing anymore" (Caillois 1961, 6).

Of course, according to the logic of neo-liberal economics, testers choose to be employed based on their free will and they can stop playing/working any time they want. But if one's survival depends on wage labor, can we then talk about the freedom to quit? Nonetheless, despite the drawbacks, game testing still comes very close to the

affirmation of the self and the play-like features of testing as a job reveal the "de-alienating" sides of it, which indeed makes exploitation worse (Fisher 2012). If it weren't for these de-alienating aspects, it would be hard to understand the desire to want a worse job in the game industry than a better job in other sectors. Indeed, since game testing has play features in it, the performance principle, with its ludic elements, may become harder to disrupt or resist. The performance principle itself becomes fun. The work of testers is not only compensated by money but also by the very embodied pleasures they derive from work, which are integrated into the very fabric of the self of the game tester.

5. Conclusion: Rejecting the Affirmative Culture of Tech-Driven Creativity?

The video game industry has pioneered in bringing together rationality and emotions, love and toil, work and passionate play. To repurpose PJ Rey's (2015, 289) skepticism towards gamification, I ask: Is the instrumentalization of play and similar work practices in the broader triple-A game production worth accepting, given the sequel driven, "risk adverse, conservative design" (Keogh 2015, 153) logic of triple-A businesses, whose products impose technological advancement upon pleasure? Perhaps an even more difficult question would be: Is negative thinking and refusal possible in such a positively and passionately framed industry and workforce, which is slowly acknowledging the many material problems on the ground (Miller and Bulkley 2013)?

The major players in the triple-A business—Electronic Arts, Square Enix, Sony, Nintendo, Activision Blizzard, Ubisoft, Microsoft—are all financialized entities, leading to what one might call a "creative conformist rationality" that heavily structures the industry. This "creative conformist rationality" is not simply a problem of whether individual workers are conformist. Rather, it is the political economic dimensions of the triple A business that force developers to conform to its financialized logic. "Creative conformist rationality" exists due to the dictates of the "affirmative culture," which Marcuse defined as "the assertion of a universally obligatory, eternally better and more valuable world that must be conditionally affirmed… It is only in this culture that cultural activities and objects gain that value which elevates them above the everyday sphere. Their reception becomes an act of celebration and exaltation" (2007, 87). The affirmative culture of the game industry demands a creative, technological soul from its workers. But this soul is restricted to operate within a limited notion of freedom, thereby causing the industry to fail achieving multi-dimensionality, which may very well give us a more diverse set of games produced with different sets of tools, design structures, and narratives. As Leigh Alexander (2013, np) confirms, "game companies bet on becoming the single most attractive player in the same homogenous field rather than branching out to create something new and risking expensive failure." Marcuse defines one-dimensionality as "conforming to existing thought and behavior and lacking a critical dimension of potentialities that transcend the existing society" (1964, xxviii). The hegemonic one-dimensionality in the industry, which profits from an instrumental approach towards play, may fail

to transcend the existing genres and design structures precisely because it is mostly fixated on better graphics and technological virtuosity as tied to the performance principle.

We witnessed this fixation on technological power, again, only in the recent discussions following the announcement of Microsoft Xbox One X, "the world's most powerful console" that provides "immersive true 4K gaming," "smoother gameplay," "bigger worlds," "life-like detail" and "faster load times."[3] The new Xbox One X will not have any exclusive games and will enable the consumers to play games that they are already playing on the original X Box One or X Box S. What is new is better resolution and speed. Interviewing the company's senior director of product management and planning, Alberto Penello, *Gamasutra* asked how Microsoft felt about why tiny independent studios and mid-size developers would want to embark on this "mid-generation leap over and above the 4K aspect." Penello defended the shift to a new console by saying "more power always enables more creativity", adding that "developers like power. They'll find other ways to use that power."[4]

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse (1964, 11) wrote: "People recognize themselves in their commodities. They find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment." Now, we find our souls in our smart phones and game consoles. And it seems that the creative souls in the triple-A industry are strictly defined by the technical objectivity of speed, performance, and screen resolution. According to Penello's assertion, creativity depends highly on computer power, suggesting that game developers have to organize their artistic and coding skills primarily in the service of technology and its computing power. Surely, a tech-driven creativity—the affirmative culture of the industry—does give individuals the opportunity to express themselves but it is also a creativity of contradictions as it negates genuine authorship and different kinds of creativities that could have emerged if it weren't for the one-dimensional creativity that seems to have colonized the majority of triple-A logic. It is unlikely, however, that space for multi-dimensional creativity and multi-dimensional games will come into being through the triple-A producers. It will most likely be independent game developers and individual game makers—the marginalized populations in the game production world—who will be able to redefine creativity in more multi-dimensional ways, thanks not only to lower levels of entry to game creation but also the transformative and critical approach towards art and culture.

[3]http://www.xbox.com/en-US/xbox-one-x?xr=shellnav

[4]http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/300357/QA_How_Microsoft_is_pitching_the_Xbox_One_X_to_devs_and_consumers.php?elq_mid=79018&elq_cid=12446710&elqTrackId=f2b5f258562843aeb073e1546efc2653&elq=4032717dd5524c6f957eeb4dab35d7e9&elqaid=79018&elqat=1&el

References

Alexander, Leigh. 2013. "Playing Outside." *The New Inquiry*. Last accessed 7 August 2017: https://thenewinquiry.com/playing-outside/

Banks, Miranda. 2009. "Gender Below-the-Line: Defining Feminist Production Studies." In Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, 87–99. New York & London: Routledge.

Boltanski, Luc, and Eve Chiapello. 2005. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London; New York: Verso.

Braverman, Harry. 1974. *Labor and Monopoly Capital; the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Briziarelli, Marco. 2016. "Invisible Play and Invisible Game: Video Game Testers or The Unsung Heroes of Knowledge Working." tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique 14 (1): 249–259.

Bulut, Ergin. 2015. "Playboring in the Tester Pit: The Convergence of Precarity and the Degradation of Fun in Video Game Testing." Television & New Media 16 (3): 240–58. doi:10.1177/1527476414525241.

Caillois, Roger. 1961. Man, Play, and Games. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.

Charrieras, Damien, and Myrtille Roy-Valex. 2008. "Video Game Culture as Popular Culture? The Productive Leisure of Video Game Workers of Montreal." Paper presented in the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Canada.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1992. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." October 59 (Winter): 3–7.

Dowling, Emma. 2007. "Producing the Dining Experience: Measure, Subjectivity and the Affective Worker." Ephemera 7 (1): 117–32.

Dyer-Witheford, Nick, and Greig de Peuter. 2009. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Edwards, Caroline. 2013. "From Eros to Eschaton: Herbert Marcuse's Liberation of Time." Telos Winter 2013 (165): 91–114.

Feenberg, Andrew. 2005. *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History*. New York & London: Routledge.

Feenberg, Andrew. 2017. "Beyond One-Dimensionality." In *The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*. Edited by Andrew Lamas, Todd Wolfson, and Peter Funke, 229–41. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Fisher, Eran. 2012. "How Less Alienation Creates More Exploitation? Audience Labour on Social Network Sites." tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society 10 (2): 171–83.

Forman, Michael. 2017. "Marcuse in the Crisis of Neoliberal Capitalism." In *The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*. Edited by Andrew Lamas, Todd Wolfson, and Peter Funke, 29–54. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Fuchs, Christian. 2016. Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet. London: Westminster University Press.

Fuchs, Christian 2017. "Herbert Marcuse and the Dialectics of Social Media." In *The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*. Edited by Andrew Lamas, Todd Wolfson, and Peter Funke, 241–57. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Funke, Peter, Andrew Lamas, and Todd Wolfson. 2017. "Bouazizi's Refusal and Ours: Critical Reflections on the Great Refusal and Contemporary Social Movements." In *The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*, 1–25. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Gibson, Chris, Chantel Carr, and Andrew Warren. 2015. "Making Things: Beyond the Binary of Manufacturing and Creativity." In *The Routledge Companion to the Cultural Industries*, edited by Kate Oakley and Justin O'Connor, 86–96. New York & London: Routledge.

Gregg, Melissa. 2011. Work's Intimacy. UK: Polity Press.

Grimes, Sara M., and Andrew Feenberg. 2009. "Rationalizing Play: A Critical Theory of Digital Gaming." The Information Society 25 (2): 105–18.

Hearn, Alison. 2010. "Reality Television, The Hills, and the Limits of the Immaterial Labour Thesis." TripleC: Cognition, Communication, Co-Operation 8 (1): 60–76.

Huizinga, Johan. 1944. *Homo Ludens; a Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Kellner, Douglas. 1984. *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Keogh, Brendan. 2015. "Between Triple-A, Indie, Casual, and DIY: Sites of Tension in the Videogames Cultural Industries." In Routledge Companion to the Cultural Industries, edited by Justin O'Connor and Kate Oakley, 152–62. New York & London: Routledge.

Kerr, Aphra. 2011. "The Culture of Gamework." In Managing Media Work, edited by Mark Deuze, 225–37. SAGE.

Kerr, Aphra. 2017. *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Era*. New York & London: Routledge.

Kücklich, Julian. 2009. "Virtual Worlds and Their Discontents: Precarious Sovereignty, Governmentality, and the Ideology of Play." Games and Culture 4 (4): 340–52.

Lamas, Andrew, Todd Wolfson, and Peter Funke, eds. 2017. *The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Lazzarato, Maurizio. 1996. "Immaterial Labor." In Radical Thought in Italy, edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, 133–51. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lund, Arwid. 2014. "Playing, Gaming, Working and Labouring: Framing the Con-Cepts and Relations." tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society 12 (2): 735–801.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1955. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Humanitas; Beacon Studies in Humanities. Boston: Beacon Press. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebookbatch.ASP_batch:ASPS010023165soth.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1964. *One-Dimensional Man*. 2nd ed. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1973. "On the Philosophical Foundation of the Concept of Labor in Economics." Telos Summer (16).

Marcuse, Herbert. 2007. "The Affirmative Character of Culture." In Art and Liberation: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse Volume Four, edited by Douglas Kellner, 82–113. New York & London: Routledge.

Mayer, Vicki. 2011. Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mayer, Vicki, Miranda Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds. 2009. Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries. New York & London: Routledge.

McGuigan, Jim. 2012. "The Coolness of Capitalism Today." Edited by Christian Fuchs and Vincent Mosco. TripleC: Cognition, Communication, Co-Operation, no. Special issue: Marx is Back: 425–38.

Miller, Patrick, and Brad Bulkley. 2013. "Game Developer Quality-of-Life Survey." Gamasutra, March.

Nakamura, Lisa. 2009. "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft." Critical Studies in Media Communication 26 (2): 128–44.

Neff, Gina, Elizabeth Wissinger, and Sharon Zukin. 2005. "Entrepreneurial Labor among Cultural Producers: "'Cool"' Jobs in "'Hot"' Industries." Social Semiotics 15 (3): 307–34.

Rey, PJ. 2015. "Gamification and Post-Fordist Capitalism." In *The Gameful Word: Approaches, Issues, Applications*. Edited by Steffen Walz and Sebastian Deterding, 277–95. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Ross, Andrew. 2003. *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs*. PA: Temple University Press.

Ross, Andrew. 2007. "Nice Work If You Can Get It: The Mercurial Career of Creative Industries Policy." In My Creativity Reader, edited by Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, 17–41. Amster: Institute of Network Cultures.

Schiller, Friedrich. 1965. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: A Series of Letters*. New York: Frederick Ungar.

Tokumitsu, Miya. 2015. *Do What You Love: And Other Lies About Success and Happiness*. New York: Regan Arts.

Turner, Fred. 2009. "Burning Man at Google: A Cultural Infrastructure for New Media Production." New Media & Society 11 (1–2): 73–94.

Walker, Abe. 2011. "Creativity Loves Constraints': The Paradox of Google's Twenty Percent Time." Ephemera 11 (4): 369–87.

Wolin, Richard. 2001. *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Yee, Nick. 2006. "The Labor of Fun: How Video Games Blur the Boundaries of Work and Play." Games and Culture 1 (1): 68–71. doi:10.1177/1555412005281819.

About the Author

Ergin Bulut

Ergin Bulut is an International Research Fellow at the Westminster Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Westminster (2017). He works as an assistant professor in the Department of Media and Visual Arts at Koc University, Istanbul. The broad scope of his work and teaching engages with creative industries and creative labor, political economy of video games within a global context, digital media and politics, global media, critical theory and cultural studies. His research has been published in peer-reviewed journals including *Media, Culture and Society, Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication, Television and New Media*, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *Interactions: Studies in Communication and Culture, Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, *Globalization, Societies and Education*. He is currently finishing his book, tentatively titled *A Precarious Game: Working in the Digital Game Industry*, which is scheduled to be published in 2018.