

LUDUS AND CIVILISATION

**Play as an emancipatory concept from the perspective of Critical
theory**

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1 INTRODUCTION

Work and play form one of the most fundamental dichotomies of human life in modernity. Each of them designates a specific sphere or a mode of being with its own aims, values, attitudes and spatial and temporal areas. A large body of conventional wisdom and common conceptions governs the understanding of these concepts that lexical definitions reflect. For instance, Dictionary.com (n.d.) mentions work and play as each other's antonyms in their own respective entries. These negative and positive definitions, on top of common ways of speaking about these concepts¹, emphasise their distinctiveness that could even be called an antagonism. This makes both appear as constitutive outsides for the other, i.e., as the negative other that gives a concept meaning and renders it understandable. Work is often seen as something that requires an external motivating force and even more enthusiastic-sounding notions of it as a building block of identity in entrepreneurial fashion are mostly sugar-coated appeals to encourage people to engage in activities that are not that appealing in themselves. On the other hand, play is something fun, free and intrinsically motivated. One might want to do nothing but play but everyone is taught from a young age how it is not realistic and how the necessity for unpleasant toil is simply a fact of life. Only the most irresponsible freeloaders and lunatics out of touch with reality would dare to question this.

Yet at the same time, people often tend to have a hard time separating work and leisure, which most often refers to the tendency of work-like attitudes and actions to invade free time. Learning to juggle with these spheres and making them distinct enough is a common topic in self-help literature, consultancy and therapy (see, for example, Carter 2020). Meanwhile, gamification ("the application of game-design elements and game principles in non-game contexts") has become

¹ "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy", "Life can't be all fun and games", "You must work hard to earn your living", "No playing at work!", "Separating work and leisure", "It didn't even feel like work", "Working hours and free time" and "That's not real work" are all phrases and expressions instantly understandable to common sense.

increasingly popular and works as a way to blur the line between work and play by making work-like activities feel more like playing (Walter 2021). Coupled with the facts that the increased productivity afforded by technological progress has long been known to potentially decrease the necessary work time required to meet our material needs (Keynes 2010) and that gaming is becoming more and more popular, one could justifiably speak of a potential turning point in the relation between work and play that calls for a critical examination.

I approach this topic by examining the possibility of a radically different society formed around the principles of play. The main question is whether and how play could work as a critical concept in this manner, functioning as a model for a world without oppression or unnecessary repression. This idea should sound like a full-on utopia and that is what it is meant to be in the spirit of the most radical desires for a completely different order in the Marxist tradition of critical theory. This, in turn, presents strict restrictions on what I could accept without breaking this critical promise. To settle for anything less would be to give in to the all-encompassing repressive and dehumanising logic of domination that determines almost all human action in the late-capitalist society and only allows formulations that strengthen this system (see, for example, Horkheimer & Adorno 2002).

To achieve this, I will look at different approaches to the phenomenon of play in the ever-expanding discipline of game studies² to examine the basic concepts. Sebastian Deterding (2014) provides a handy classification of different kinds of rhetorics concerning play, which helps distinguish different theoretical approaches in relation to my research interests. Other essays published in the same book called *The Gameful World* (Walz & Deterding 2014) mainly help me to criticise the forms that play and games take in the current order and express what to avoid. I will also consider some other prominent definitions and theories of play and games and their relation to a wider cultural context.

One possible challenge of using play as a model for the entire society is its negative aspect shared by many definitions. In essence, this means that play is often defined as something other than its surrounding world that is considered more real than play that takes a break from this world, creating its own alternative reality. A great example is the definition of play provided in the book *Rules of Play*; “Play is free movement within a more rigid structure” (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, chapter 22 p. 4). Following this could potentially mean that in a society where everything is play, nothing really is. However, dialectics provides the saving grace with its ability to make distinctions between essence and appearance, find the truth of a concept in its inherent negativity and reconcile differences. Following this logic, I can start building a foundation for my case that work and play are not in any kind of eternal

² The field could just as well be called play studies since it includes the most essential research on the wide phenomenon of play too. The relation of the concepts of play and game will be discussed later but in essence games are one form of play yet at the same time play is one aspect of games (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, chapter 7).

antagonism with each other and that their tension can be overcome.

This foundation leads to Herbert Marcuse's examination of Freudian theory in *Eros and Civilization* (1974). Freud himself was known for bourgeois attitudes towards work and play (Riesman 1950) and he famously concluded that the development and stability of culture requires heavy repression of instincts and consequent suffering (Freud 1961a). Marcuse, in turn, demonstrates how Freudian theory can function as a justification for a non-repressive society. This is basically a psychological expression of what Marxists would call the highest stage of communism³. Here the reconciliation of the tension between pleasure and reality principle correspond to overcoming the antagonism of work and play. Marcuse fittingly emphasises, following Schiller's aesthetical theory, how work would become play once the material conditions allow it. Hence play receives legitimation as a radical model for a more humane world since its dialectical examination unfolds its subversive potential that play's determinate forms hide. This opens the possibility for radical playful aesthetics.

³ I interpret the connection to be so strong that an objection against communism will always be treated as an objection against a utopia formed around the principle of play in this study and vice versa. The same applies to support for either of these.

2 CRITICAL THEORY

As already briefly mentioned, my endeavour is informed and inspired by critical social philosophy. At this instance I am using the term to refer to a wide range of social theories whose aim is to radically critique existing societies by emphasising how fundamental their flaws are. These theories are always guided by an emancipatory interest but formulating truly emancipatory ideas is generally more difficult than in traditional theories. (Bohman 2021.) The difficulty stems from acknowledging the deeply historical nature of all the tools, such as language and reason, that are utilised both in conventional thinking and in science. Consequently, the scope of the critique needs to cover not only the social phenomena but also the instruments of understanding that are used in this process. This, in essence, is why these theories are often required to be extremely self-conscious and use language and logic that might seem prolix and even unreasonable to established reason. More conventional language, on the other hand, has a tendency to repeat and support the same order that determines what conventionality entails.

While I am generally guided by this broader notion of critical theory, this research requires me to confine my scope to the Critical theory of Frankfurt school and some of its most central figures such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse. Horkheimer (1975), in particular, has provided a handy manifesto for a critical approach to society in his classic essay *Traditional and Critical Theory* where it is explicitly contrasted to what theory is in more conventional science. This theory is Marxist in nature since it takes as its basis the economy based on exchange and uses its principles to develop a more substantive understanding of society (Horkheimer 1975, 225). In fact, Horkheimer regards Marx himself as a representative of critical theory, making this school of thought an interpretation of the radical and emancipatory core of Marxist thinking rather than a completely new invention. He also repeatedly emphasises how the critical approach differs from traditional science that considers itself disconnected from value judgements and social interests with its neat method of classifications and deductions. However, this does not mean that it should be abolished and discarded since traditional theory has been and will be greatly advantageous to humanity and can even supplement a more critical

approach. The problem is that it is not sufficient in itself for realising the true potential of humanity and questioning the existing social totality and its own place in it. (Horkheimer 1975.) This goes back to Marx's demand for philosophy to not only interpret the world but to also change it.

When it comes to Karl Marx himself, the ideas that are the most relevant to my thesis are found in his early thought. It goes without saying that Marx's extensive economic treatises that deduce how capitalism fails to fulfil its goals of creating ever-expanding well-being for everyone by harmonising and aligning competing egoistic interests are essential and intimately connected with my research. However, these topics are too complex to be properly discussed here so I will focus on the prevailing mode of labour (process) as the core problem of capitalism. Moreover, alienated labour can be used to derive the concept of private property whereas these factors allow Marx to develop all economic categories (Marx 2009, 34). The concept of alienated labour and its contrast to conventional economics highlights the difference between a critical and traditional theory since the latter takes economic factors whose principles it expresses as abstract laws for granted and treats humans accordingly as abstract agents reduced to their economic functions (Marx 2009, 28). A critical approach to economics, on the other hand, seeks to understand the basis and origin of those categories and what they entail to the existence of humans.

In this vein, the alienation in labour process refers to the fact that a worker produces something alien and hostile to themselves as a product of labour (Marx 2009, 29). The resulting object is not a reward for the activity, a direct fulfilment of a need of the worker or some other person. Instead, it creates an independent power whose production is a means to satisfy an external need. An activity serving this power is alien to a worker, alienating them not only from the product of labour but also themselves as a person (Marx 2009, 30). Finally, people are also estranged from the species of humans since Marx interprets work on inorganic nature shaped in our image to be the expression of our species as consciously determined agents. As a result, an individual is first and foremost a worker instead of being universally human. (Marx 2009, 31–32.) When one's objects of production and labour are alien, they must belong to something else and that something is another person who inherits the same estranged properties that labour has, making them an independent and hostile master (Marx 2009, 33). Thus, alienated labour has created the relationship between a worker and an owner and the whole economy, including its problems of wealth accumulation and exploitation, emerges from this basis.

The idea of an independent and hostile power created by the labour process may sound esoteric and unintuitive, but it should be read as an explanation of an independent world of commodities and exchange. It is a deeper expression of the common way of talking about "the economy" as an independent subject with its

own laws that need to be served even if they require actions that do not directly fulfil any human needs. The system that the commodities⁴ create is internally rational, but its rationality fails from the perspective of the potential of humans as free, consciously self-determined and active agents. It creates false needs and unnecessary economic pressure to keep producing more and more exchange value while making the livelihoods of billions depend on graphs indicating abstract variables separate from material reality. The major principles of economy are laws of an estranged power based on estranged labour that turns an active expression of our humanity into ungratifying toil. This labour process is the core that needs to change if play is to prevail.

These themes of rationality are greatly expanded and given a deeper historical context in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where Adorno and Horkheimer present their famous critique of the titular enlightenment⁵ and how it manifests in advanced industrial capitalism (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002). The work concentrates its criticism on the prevailing mode of enlightened reason and its oppressive tendencies. Society is argued to be governed by instrumental reason, exemplified by positivistic science that expresses its objects as laws and formulas. This seemingly value-neutral trait, however, turns out to exemplify an a priori technological logic of control that only comprehends objects to the extent to which they can be manipulated without recognising additional qualities or meanings. (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 3.). The irony and the dialectical tension of the enlightenment lies in the fact that enlightenment was conceived as a tool to liberate humans from the dominating nature, fear and irrationality yet it has become a tool of domination itself. Enlightened reason knows only instrumentality while being blind towards itself, constituting an internally rational apparatus that is irrational as a whole (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 23). This results in consciousness for whom people appear as rationally administrable objects of domination, which can even lead to fascism at worst. Not only are the workers oppressed by their economic relations to capitalists but humans per se given their roles as atomised cogs in the machine of instrumentality. Other writers have expressed similar ideas (see, for example, Marcuse 2007) but *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is probably the most famous and ambitious description of a world betrayed by failed reason in this theoretical tradition. It stands as a great example of a radical critique that demonstrates the implicit commitments (and their problematic nature) that are often made when using what have become conventional approaches.

This describes the theoretical approach and method that I use when exploring the topic. The main features to take away are the oppressiveness of the

⁴ A commodity is a product or service produced by labour to be transferred for another person to use by the means of exchange (Marx 2015,30). In capitalism labour is a commodity whose peculiar use value is the ability to create more exchange value.

⁵ From this point on, I will be using the word enlightenment to refer to how Horkheimer and Adorno understood it.

social totality, the fundamentality of perceived problems and the resulting need for self-criticality. I will not be interested in proposing ways to achieve something desirable within this order but, instead, I am seeking something that shatters its oppressive limits. However, I am not denying that the former approach has any value even if it fits within the confinements that are supposed to be overcome.

2.1 Emancipatory concepts

Given the totalitarian and totalising nature of prevailing reason, for anything to be truly emancipatory it needs to be radical and designate a completely different basis for ordering the lives of humans. In this case, taking actions that are typically associated with play, encouraging people to perform more of them at work and maybe gathering data and concluding that they have become more satisfied would be exactly the approach to be avoided. It is a typical example of what Horkheimer (1975) calls traditional theory. Yet at the same time Critical theory is also immanent meaning that a theory about a more desirable world cannot be created out of nothing but instead has to be derived from the potential of what already exists.

This describes what Marx did when he began by explicating the principles of the political economy of his time and deducing the way that the system eventually undermines its own basis (Marcuse 2000, 313). The distinguishing feature of his method and the one that allows it to formulate truly emancipatory ideas is its dialectical nature, inspired by Hegel. In essence, dialectics sees its objects as a negative totality i.e., things are not only what they are in appearance but also include what they have been, will be and are not. The truth is in the whole and things unfold in their negations, becoming what they really are when turning into what their appearance is not. In this method the universal is given the status of being more real than particulars or their appearances. (Marcuse 2000, 213–215.) In short dialectics can be described as a form of logic or a method of seeking truth through contradictions. The utility of this method lies in its ability to go beyond what is given and resolve these apparent contradictions. A great example of this is the concept of alienated labour in Marx's theory. The existing facts concerning the way that work is organised are clearly undesirable, but they only become understandable in the light of their abolishment when contrasted to the universals of work and humanity without additional attributes as definite moments. Alienated labour is an inherently negative concept because it contains the basis of an entire economy and its contradictions that undermine that basis while demonstrating how it could be abolished by changing the relations of ownership and production allowed by these contradictions. As Marcuse put it: "The analysis of the prevailing form of labor is simultaneously an analysis of the premises of its abolition" (2000, 295). While it is true that I barely even scratched the surface of the extremely complex topic of the (critical) philosophy of work, in this case it is enough to introduce it as the other side

of the coin I am examining.

Recognising oppressive conditions is not all that there is to something being emancipatory. The dialectic relies on being able to distinguish what its object really is beyond its determinate forms even though this essence is in no way disconnected from appearances in and as different moments. This kind of thinking focuses on change and what persists in it rather than on static objects. In Marxist dialectics the totality is always social and historical with the negative aspect requiring something positive as its counterpart (Marcuse 2000, 295–296, 313–314). Labour would have no critical potential if we were not able to conceive work beyond alienation and exploitation and this is the perspective that I am focusing on. I am interested in approaching this same pattern from the opposite direction by trying to find a concept that could provide a model and promise for a world that fully respects human potentialities. Generally, concepts that hold this kind of weight relate to something enjoyable or pleasurable that demonstrates how much better everything could be without all oppression and unnecessary repression of desires. Giving them a place in the right framework makes these concepts powerful tools:

Ideas such as essence, happiness, or theory bore evidence of inner disunity. In an authentic way they revealed the genuine potentialities of man and of nature as being in contradiction to the given reality of man and of nature; thus they were eminently critical concepts (Marcuse 2009, xix).

2.2 Play and emancipation

Grasping the meaning of something being emancipatory should already intuitively reveal how play could fit the vision presented above. Only focusing on associations without delving into strict theoretical scrutiny quite yet can already be revealing. A proper examination of different definitions will be conducted in part 3.3 but until then I will be informed by my own working definition based on that section; Play is an aspect of human activity that is defined by freedom⁶, intrinsic motivation and arbitrariness standing in opposition to reality. If the oppressive nature of the labour process is to be seriously tackled, we must go beyond economics, arguments appealing to just compensation for work and overall material conditions⁷ to understanding it as an existential category for humans (Marcuse 2000, 281). I will be taking a similar view towards play as a way of being so fundamental that it goes beyond any perceivable actions and material factors. Applying dialectics to play is to

⁶ Freedom is a tension-ridden concept whose negative and positive aspects constitute each other and need to be balanced to actualise freedom. In this case, play is always governed by some rules, however implicit they may be, but an activity only receives its meaning as play when an agent takes part in it based on their own free will instead of succumbing to external compulsions or being completely dictated by instincts and reflexes.

⁷ Materialism in a popular sense as it is generally understood in sociology.

recognise it as a universal whose meaning cannot be reduced to an operationalist analysis. Instead, it carries the weight of human potentialities as a general attitude towards being in the world. We can observe the great many ways that humans around us play but simply deducing a list of signs that indicate that something is play and compiling established functions that play has would betray its potential.

I see this choice for a concept rather natural given the centrality of work-related concepts in emancipatory struggles and play being the counterpart of work in the widely conceived dichotomy, on top of its already mentioned general qualities. If society is to become free in a radical sense, play must retain the qualities listed yet also change its status, function and form in society by becoming a truer version of itself in the negation of both play and labour. This goes back to the promise of Hegelian logic to overcome supposedly insurmountable contradictions and oppositions (Hegel 2010), though this time utilised in a context of a social and historical world and its concrete material manifestations. The end goal, in any case, is a world governed by the principle of play. It is still notable, however, that this corresponds to many other oppositions that Critical theory seeks to overcome such as public and private, myth (or revelation) and enlightenment, freedom and necessity, state and individual etc. All of these are connected to each other in complex ways, but a full elaboration of their relations is not possible here. Notwithstanding, recognising them is necessary to give more context to my exploration of play. These abolishable dichotomies correspond to my topic to some extent even if they do not completely overlap.

3 THE CONCEPT OF PLAY

I have intentionally invoked rather vague and utopian notions of a playful society, and this kind of presentation can do little more than motivate a following more precise scrutiny. To have a scientifically or philosophically satisfying research, I will have to establish a proper understanding of the central concept. Play is not a technical term per se and relying on intuitive associations is not sufficient for my aims. That is why I am taking a look at game studies to arrive at a more accurate understanding and also further elaborate what it is that I want to avoid.

3.1 Rhetorics of play

Game studies is a wide and multidisciplinary field that allow me to lay a proper groundwork for uncovering the inherent critical potential of play. The first problem is the apparent lack of any kind of widely accepted precise definition of play, which is not surprising given its clear ambiguity. Even Wittgenstein famously used the concept of game as an example of family resemblance. However, in this case the difficulty goes beyond classification and is based on the heterogeneity of approaches to the phenomenon of play and games.

Walz and Deterding (2014) have come up with two axes that can roughly organise the ways that play is understood in different frameworks. These are liminal-liminoid and ludic-paidic (ibid., 11). They primarily classify different perspectives towards and functions of play and games rather than actual games themselves. Granted, the content of a particular game determines the functions and meanings it may have to some extent but the extent to which many games and forms of play can be engaged in different ways should not be underestimated. The first axis stems from Viktor Turner's anthropology where liminality refers to transitions where usual meanings and behaviours are subverted into a space of play. These liminal phenomena are integrated into the social process and generally work as a way to optimise means towards established ends of the social whole. Liminoid rhetorics, on the other hand, aim at questioning those aims and provide a critique at

the perceived shortcomings of the social order while emphasising the subversive potential of play as a free space. (Deterding 2014, 25–26, 48–49.) In essence, the division comes down to conformity and subversiveness. The latter axis concerns the degree of open-endedness and is based on the ideas of Roger Caillois. Paidic play is open, free and exploratory such as children’s play whereas ludic play is more formalised, rule-based and goal-oriented (Walz & Deterding 2014, 7). The terms play and game invoke the difference between paidia and ludus, respectively, even though they are wider and less precise in terms of their meanings. My perspective obviously tends to align with the liminoid and paidic ends of the axes described.

Deterding also goes further in classifying different “rhetorics of the gameful world” into 14 categories using 11 different aspects including the two dimensions described above to make sense of many conflicting ways of talking about play. The ones that describe my perspective have been dubbed exploitation, cultural form and free playfulness, with all of them combining paidic and liminoid perspectives (Deterding 2014, 35–38). Exploitation directly aligns itself with critical theory as it critiques the use of games as tools that serve oppressive conditions and often try to conceal the exploitation and alienation that are inherent in social processes. The rhetoric of cultural form, on the other hand, focuses on games as an aesthetic form that should not be subjected to an evaluation based on instrumental functionality. Play reflects cultural meanings and functions as a medium of creative expression that can critically reflect on its surroundings. Finally, playfulness emphasises play as an antithesis to all structure and form. It is what rules and order bind and restrict, a negativity that hence escapes definition. (ibid., 40–41, 46–47.) The latter two are clearly closer to each other than the first and they basically represent the emancipatory positive counterpart to the oppression designated by the rhetoric of exploitation. Even though I will not explicate in every turn which of these rhetorics I am using or apply them in any other similarly straight-forward fashion, I find it beneficial to explicitly mention these theoretical approaches to contextualise my discussion. How these different rhetorics manifest should become apparent on the following pages.

Even before delving into definitions, an elaboration of these perspectives should make it apparent why I have decided to use the term play instead of game. While games too might be enjoyable experiences and even have a critical potential of their own granted by the exactness of rules, clear feedback and instant rewards based on clearly defined merit, which makes them more perfect systems than the messy external world to which they can be contrasted, its concept lacks the emphasis on qualities that play has. Salen and Zimmerman (2004, chapter 7) have provided a handy elaboration of the relation of the concepts of play and game; Games are a subset of play that also includes many less formal activities, yet at the same time play is one component of games that have many other features on top of that, such as being formal systems. It is this wider phenomenon of play and the play-aspect of

games that I am mainly interested in since those other aspects of games do not emphasise the potential for radical freedom nearly as much. This is evident by the fact that we have concepts such as game theory and that activities extremely far removed from playfulness, such as war and business, can be framed as games. The fundamental problem is that we could theoretically have a society that functions like a game as a system of precise rules, goals, scores, feedback and appraisals that is the opposite of a free space that allows the free play of human potentialities. It could be the logical endpoint of enlightenment where everything is rationalised and society has become a totalising apparatus, a collection of rules for a game to be optimised.

3.2 Gamification

Following this critique, the problem of introducing gameful elements to activities that are seen as work as it has generally been carried out becomes easy to point out. Even though gamification might not include everything that falls into this description, addressing it is sufficient for my purposes. PJ Rey (2014) has provided an excellent critique of gamification from the perspective of critical political economy. He argues that gamification shatters the modernist distinction between work and play, imploding them into the same action that continues to function on conditions set by capitalism. It is framed as a post-Fordist phenomenon, which is an abandonment of Fordist rigidity and its strict separation of work and fun. Instead, it is defined by flexibility and a blending of formerly distinct categories (Rey 2014, 279–280). This poses a challenge to my aim since this kind of post-Fordist fusion of play and work is on a surface level close to what I am arguing for, a world where this opposition is abolished, and play defines all areas of human functioning. However, in this case play is still dictated by the requirements of the market and ultimately the profits of private owners, making it an instrument of the labour process.

When it comes to the consumption side of things, gamification does not do away with the commodity nature of products nor does it leave it unaltered either but turns commodities into hypercommodities. This designates a shift in emphasis from the use value of the actual commodity bought to the symbolic meanings that are assigned to it. Understanding the gist of motivation for consuming hypercommodities requires a semiotic analysis of the signs and signifiers that give each product its specific meaning and value and how gamification makes them elastic and easily re-assignable. When the importance of these signs rises above that of the surface on which they are assigned, the actual intrinsic value of commodity gets negated and replaced as a medium of representation. Consequently, the abstract and arbitrary world of symbols is made more central and real than what is concrete. (Rey 2014, 282–284.) One of the best current examples of a hypercommodity is offered by non-fungible tokens (Sharma 2021) that do not provide any additional use value compared to the ways that anyone can use the same file for free. The main

point is that play has become a commodity in service of capitalism instead of being engaged with by its own conditions.

In production, on the other hand, gamification “de-alienates” labour by trying to make it appropriate elements of actions that are perceived as fun and intrinsically motivating. Rey calls the result playbor and distinguishes it from play that is unproductive⁸ by its nature whereas playbor aims at making profits for the capitalist. Even though the de-alienation of labour can still be seen as a welcome development when compared to the repressive toil that is modernist wage labour, its downside is the increased efficiency of exploitation that play-like qualities allow. The one who instantly benefits certainly is not the worker and the fact that voluntariness is more likely should not be confused with freedom. (Rey 2014, 285–289.) The final problem is disenchantment in the way that Weber conceived it, which is a feature of all capitalism and its corresponding rationalisation that deprives the world of all wonder and divinity. When even play is subjected to similar goals, the formerly free sphere of enjoyment tends to lose its central qualities that stand against oppressive labour (Rey 2014, 290–291). Rey concludes expressively: “with gamification, we collect the points while the capitalists collect the dollars” (Rey 2014, 291).

On top of this, Ian Bogost (2014) has gone on record to frame gamification as nothing more than bullshit⁹ in the spirit of Harry G. Frankfurt. He argues that the general tendency of gamification to reduce games into individual and incidental features such as points and badges is not even based on a misunderstanding of the essence of games but on a complete lack of concern for it. In fact, the entire project is so far removed from games¹⁰ that Bogost prefers to use the term exploitationware while recognising how even the proponents of gamification have started to openly discuss it as a way to produce compliance (Bogost 2014, 72). The whole interpretation and purpose are irrelevant to the empty talk surrounding gamification (Bogost 2014, 77).

While I accept these critiques, it does not mean that there is no room for my suggested idea of play as the prevailing principle of a society. The failure of gamification does not rule over the possibility of something resembling it that manages to appreciate the full richness of play. Even though a precise exploration of practical applications goes beyond the limits of my research, I find Miguel Sicart’s (2014) essay on gamification and ethics worth mentioning. One of the central points is to recognise how gamification often mistakes easily calculable indicators of good

⁸ Here productive is understood in the narrow sense that capitalism and enlightenment see economic productiveness and not in a richer sense like Fromm’s productive personality (Fromm 2003).

⁹ Bullshit is essentially empty talk that distances itself from lying (consciously seeking to deceive and convince someone about the opposite of truth) by demonstrating a complete disregard for facts. Bullshit operates outside the realm of truths and falsehoods by treating speech as acts whose effect is the only thing that matters.

¹⁰ These systems are not designed for fulfilling play that allows and encourages engaging and creative expression in a free space.

life for what makes something a part of a good life. In his example of running, this problem is evident in the over-reliance of trackable numbers such as kilometres passed, which ignores running as a focal practice. Sicart calls focal practices activities that allow us to exercise virtues and fully engage with the world as reflective beings (2014, 230–231). Other essential aspects are autonomy, expressiveness and appropriation (taking over situations and making them playful) and all of these can be included in designs to develop something that does away with the narrow strictness and rigidity of gamification (Sicart 2014, 237). Even though Sicart uses these ideas to develop a basis for gamified technologies, his vision can also be used as a more fundamental model for what it would be like to have many of our useful activities to be playful. It could be called the negation of gamification that sublates it while unfolding its inherent potential.

3.3 Conceptual challenges

Before delving deeper into said sublation, I find it necessary to take a look at some definitions of play. These should explain the content of my working definition. A natural starting point is Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1980), which is one of the most cited classics in the field of game studies. His central thesis is that play is not just some part of culture but that culture "arises *in* and *as* play" (Huizinga 1980, 173) with the book exploring the play-aspect of different areas of culture. Even though Huizinga explicitly states that play is not susceptible of exact definition, he lists and describes the main characteristics of play (Huizinga 1980, 7). They are summarised as follows:

...we might call it [play] a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (Huizinga 1980, 13).

There is a lot to unpack here but the aspect that first catches the eye is the negativity of play as something that receives its meaning from being outside some ordinary life. Play seems to require a world that is more real to stand against it, which aligns with common conceptions. Huizinga still emphasises how this should not be confused with the lack of seriousness since it can be extremely serious even if the seriousness is not based on external and straight-forwardly material interests. The denial of material interests and profit, however, is probably the most widely

problematic aspect of Huizinga's conceptualisation and one that he expresses more strongly here than he even himself seems to think when exploring play as a part of culture. This is why I will not stay stuck on this idea and will readily accept a softer version of it.

The negativity that Huizinga's description includes poses obvious challenges for the idea of a society of play. Worst of all, it is a part of other definitions and aforementioned common conceptions too. This is perhaps demonstrated the best by the concept of magic circle that has become one of the central concepts of game studies and is inspired by Huizinga's ideas. The basic idea is that just as ancient rituals use a magic circle to close off the regular world from the additional reality functioning within it, games create their own reality separate from the external world (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, chapter 9). This concept is reflected in the definition mentioned in the introduction: "Play is free movement within a more rigid structure" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, chapter 22 p. 4). Caillois, another famous theoretician of play, has also listed separation and make-believe (awareness of a second reality against real life) as two formal qualities of play (Caillois 2001, 9-10). If play truly attains its meaning as play by being separate from the world outside play, this reality becomes a constitutive outside without which play would be conceptually impossible. And this, in turn, seems to suggest that we do need to establish the wider society according to some other principle so that there could even be play. It is basically the same pattern as in the dialectic of light and darkness in Hegel's logic; One cannot see anything in either pure darkness or in pure light but needs both (Hegel 2010, 69).

Fortunately, the situation is not as desperate as it might seem on a surface level. First, the magic circle is mainly related to games and not to play per se. The authors even explicitly mention how there is no clear demarcation of less formal play such as playful activities that children engage in (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, chapter 9 p. 2). The "rigid structure", on the other hand, needs to be understood in the widest possible sense that includes any boundaries that there can be for human activity, all the way down to laws of physics and the physical attributes of our environment. Notwithstanding, play must still be in some kind of opposition to the structure that allows its existence as in the example of bouncing a ball against the wall. It is restricted and made possible by gravity, physical attributes of the ball and surrounding architecture and player's own skill, with all of them being played by testing their limits and movements allowed by them. The opposition lies in the contradiction with the intended utility of a wall. (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, chapter 22 p. 4.) In this way humans could always potentially play with reality without the need of an oppressive social structure. One could also frame the advancement of technology and the abundance afforded by it coupled with a decreasing need for strenuous toil as a widening of the area for the magic circle(s).

However, softening the idea of a separate reality does not completely

explain away the artificiality of play, which makes a playful utopia literally unrealistic. This will be one of the main themes of the following chapter but there is also an opposite difficulty in the notions I presented. When Huizinga claims that culture arises in and as play and demonstrates how a central play-aspect can be found in pretty much all major facets of civilisation, it runs the risk of making the concept too broad. If culture has always been play by its very nature, how could play introduce a revolutionary change? This problem is not as crippling as it might first look either since the meaning and function of play in civilisation changes alongside historical developments i.e., what has in certain conditions been a part of an order far removed from utopia might be infused with a different meaning in different conditions. For instance, some cultural phenomenon in pre-modern times might have included a play-element but the ability to utilise nature for material needs was so primitive in comparison to modern times that the normal life of average person was dictated by necessary toil for a large part. This need, in turn, introduces a requirement for repressing many instincts to have enough energy to make ends meet. Even if there were societies where some individuals could freely devote their lives to cultural activities that included a central play-aspect, their freedom was sustained by slavery or lower estates. In contrast to this, the potential of play in culture has been transformed by the advancement of technology that could allow it to become the prevailing principle of everyday life of the entire society. In short, culture has always been play, at least to some extent, but it would become play in a radically different manner when that playfulness is generalised as the universal way of being for every member of society.

To explore this notion of culture as play further, there is a need to arrive at a more precise understanding of what is outside play or makes something not-play. This is not obvious because even the most serious aspects of culture like war and jurisprudence are seen as play (Huizinga 1980). This paradoxical notion loses some of its peculiarity when we recognise how play and more serious matters related to necessities of life are merged in the development of culture. This is reflected in the lack of a distinct word for play in many ancient languages. Huizinga sees this as an indicator for the inability to recognise a universal play-aspect common to all different forms of play, which is explained by the lack of distinctiveness in play when compared to supposed external matters (Huizinga 1980, 28–45). It is the same case with the distinction of working hours and leisure time, which would have been completely meaningless in pre-modern times. Huizinga proposes earnest as an antonym for play and argues that the latter works as an independent entity whereas the former is dependent on play as its negation. Therefore, play can include seriousness while seriousness, on the other hand, seeks to exclude play. (Huizinga 1980, 44–45.)

However, the idea of earnestness is not developed very far even though Huizinga proceeds to take a normative stance against the perceived reduction of

playfulness in modern times (Huizinga 1980, 206). Fortunately, a supplementing theory can be found elsewhere since I see a correspondence between Huizinga's earnestness and the notion of enlightenment put forward by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002). In this scenario myth takes the place of play, which should illuminate the essence of the difference between a playful and an earnest culture. If enlightenment is characterised by instrumental rationality, quantification, domination and efficiency while overlooking the basis and ends between the means, we can conceive the essential quality of playful cultural phenomena openly embracing the myth. In the example of war¹¹, enlightened earnestness determines a straight-forward end goal for a conflict and then seeks to rationally utilise any means available to get as close to that as possible while weighing the pros and cons of different choices. The playful alternative would be to view the conflict as a contest that demonstrates the proficiency of different sides and must be conducted in accordance with rules and principles that cannot be reduced to necessities of life. To slay the opponent by any means necessary would make the victory meaningless. In essence, activities of a playful culture construct their own meanings whereas enlightenment discards meaning altogether leaving only empty instrumentality.

3.4 Dialectical transcendence of the conceptual challenges

From the presented notion a question rises: If culture has always been play even in unjust societies, how could play work as the positive part of a radical critique? This problem can easily be circumvented by noting that the lack of a true universality of play for every person is what makes those social entities unjust whereas making their lives more playful would introduce a substantive change in their mode of being. Therefore, (Re)incorporating a dominating play-element to culture would designate a return to what civilisation has always been yet at the same time introduce a radical departure from anything that has ever existed. This is so because play does not remain the same in its different appearances in different social orders. Granted, beyond them lies an essence that retains something in all this change even if it is never separate from concrete forms of play. Once again, the same basic idea applies to Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002) exploration of enlightenment since they are not arguing for pre-enlightened mysticism against enlightenment but instead make the case that the latter has proven as an unsatisfactory successor to the former. Enlightenment should not be abolished but instead critically re-evaluated to help it overcome its fatal limitations and reconcile the tension between modern and premodern worldviews: "Enlightenment itself, having mastered itself and assumed its own power, could break through the limits of enlightenment" (Horkheimer &

¹¹ I am intentionally using war as an example because it demonstrates how the difference goes beyond morality. Huizinga himself emphasises how play is neither good nor bad in itself (1980, 213). Having said this, there are definitely strong ties to moral questions.

Adorno 2002, 172).

Even though formal definitions can never quite capture dialectically conceived concepts that receive their meanings in a negative totality, they can nonetheless be useful for elaborating the object in question. One example of this is Richard Burke's (1979) article that is motivated by the perceived inadequacy of lexical definitions and conventional notions for work and play that are seen as opposites. He, on the other hand, seeks to define the pair of concepts in a way that demonstrates their compatibility in spite of the opposition of their definite forms in modernity. Burke starts by giving a list of activities that exhaust the paradigmatic uses of the words and uses them as a reference point for constructing his own definitions. First, he calls play an "activity which is free, complete in itself, and artificial or unrealistic" (Burke 1979, 38). This definition consists of three parts with freedom being the locus of emancipatory potential. Burke recognises this when he mentions Schiller's aesthetical theory that I will get into later. Completeness might strike as the most peculiar aspect of the definition since play can never be completely disconnected from external matters and might even yield external gains. However, this does not contradict what Burke means by completeness since it is only meant to point out that play cannot be defined by and reduced to the pursuit of external objectives i.e., these gains are an incidental part to play and could be discarded without losing the meaning of an activity. Finally, artificiality hearkens back to the negativity of play that has already been discussed. When these are combined, the resulting entity points to the realisation of human potentialities in a utopian fashion:

What art, religion, and philosophy are for the few, play is for the many: a free, intrinsically satisfying activity governed by rules of man's own making and giving rise to a finite, meaningful world that man can call his own (Burke 1979, 42).

The definition of work sounds less intuitive yet highlights the power of abstracting a general concept from its definite appearances and all incidental qualities connected to them; Work is an "activity which is part of a whole and which is governed by a discipline imposed on the parts by that whole" (Burke, 1971, 45). The two main aspects here are the centrality of the whole and the discipline that work requires. The former is what distinguishes the concept from play since it emphasises the extrinsic orientation of work to meet external goals that receive their meaning from the whole. Discipline is required to meet these goals, but it does not rule over the possibility of freedom despite limiting it because discipline is argued to presuppose an agent that is free to reject an activity. It is also important to note that neither of these qualities define the entire work process i.e., an activity does not have to be completely extrinsically motivated but only needs to have this externality as a part of it at some part of a process to count as work. Burke's definition reminds me of the way that Salen & Zimmerman defined play in its abstractness that seeks to capture only the most essential core without any additional attributes. I applaud this

quality for its ability to go beyond what is immediately given and present something pure to which concrete forms of work can be contrasted. It is noteworthy how these conceptions of work and play do not contradict each other and how efficiently work is separated from alienated labour and unfulfilling toil. Even though Burke does not develop the political implications of his ideas very far despite even mentioning Marx, he calls the combination of work and play into the same activity his “formula for utopia” (ibid., 46–47). If only he had known how efficiently capitalism would be able to corrupt this ideal.

Unfortunately, there is one minor flaw in Burke’s definitions reflecting his lack of a more developed political perspective. Despite emphasising how activities can be both work and play, he still defines both as activities whereas Lawrence Hinman (1975) has pointed out that work and play are not activities per se but two aspects of what he calls human activities. Hinman’s emphasis on a dialectical interpretation of these concepts is likely what allows him to make this distinction. He explicitly criticises a static view of work and play that relies on insurmountable distinctions and oppositions where servility is eternalised as a part of work’s natural essence (Hinman 1975, 329–330). This problematised view is coupled with a one-dimensional understanding of human needs that are reduced to straight-forward material conditions (Hinman 1975, 331–333). In contrast, a proper understanding of human needs and work and play as their fulfilment needs to rely on a richer idea of humanity that treats even economic concepts as existential categories in the spirit of Marx.

Now that a lack of any inherent obstacles in the concept of play as an emancipatory force has been established, there are roughly two directions where one could proceed to construct a broader dialectical analysis. The first is concerned with the way that a change towards the envisioned society could be achieved and needs to incorporate a critical economic analysis on top of many other fields into that endeavour. The second possibility is a deeper elaboration of the final utopia and its theoretical possibility. That is what I have chosen for the next section since I am mainly interested in providing a theoretical justification for a utopia¹² and not a roadmap for achieving it. Granted, these two directions are not completely separate when an analysis of a more humane world is simultaneously an analysis of the negative aspect of what is actual. Given that, providing instructions for practical subversive design or concrete political struggles is not the same as taking a psychoanalytical dive to the structures of personality to truly explore the idea of human freedom.

¹² I am aware of the general perception of Critical theory being negative and anti-utopian, which is most likely the source of its commonly perceived pessimism. This, however, mainly applies to thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno from which I will now depart (without denying and abandoning their insights) and move towards Marcuse. The critical approach afforded by dialectics is not by its nature in opposition to constructing positive theory, which demonstrates how arbitrary some classifications of different schools of thought and their strictly defined limits can be.

4. PSYCHOANALYSIS

No matter how much I analyse these concepts a critical reader should be left with a doubt. It is true that some objections have been cleared and emancipatory possibilities demonstrated but that rings hollow when one asks whether humans could ever actually live in a playful utopia. The intuition of the majority of people should warn that these visions are simply unrealistic even if they sounded nice theoretically. If the material and technological possibilities for a free society can be demonstrated, there is one objection left that has perhaps become the most common and long-lasting argument against communism or any similar promises for an ideal future; Human nature is flawed in such ways that a paradise can never be established even if we had any tools we could imagine at our disposal. To be able to engage with this objection, I need an established theory that works as a precise and systematic expression of human nature and its incompatibility with my proposed vision.

Psychoanalysis is here to fill the role. It is favoured by Critical theorists for a good reason because in addition to its deepness the theory is able to explain what is “normal” without taking it and the surrounding social reality as given. For instance, heterosexual monogamy is a phenomenon that requires an explanation just like any deviations from it when it is not presented as a form of postulated naturality but as a conclusion that must be drawn from the most fundamental psychic faculties in complex processes of onto- and phylogenetic development. Additionally, it can provide a verbal expression of those facets of personality that are repressed by and rebel against this reality. Psychoanalysis seeks to explain the personality structure of humans and its dynamic formation in interaction with external factors. I will limit my discussion to Freud who was known for arguing against the possibility of a civilisation that allows people to freely fulfil their needs without suffering. He even specifically criticised communists for relying on a naïve notion of human nature that fails to recognise its inherent destructiveness (Freud 1961a, 112–115). These remarks present a complex task of accurately demonstrating why the Freudian system led to such pessimistic conclusions without downplaying the challenge and then using the same system to reach different conclusions. It is also worth noting that there is a

broader trend in psychoanalysis to dismiss communism beyond Freud's personal judgement:

The communist world, it may be noted, has one big myth (which we call an illusion, in the vain hope that our superior judgment will make it disappear). It is the time-hallowed archetypal dream of a Golden Age (or Paradise), where everything is provided in abundance for everyone, and a great, just, and wise chief rules over a human kindergarten. This powerful archetype in its infantile form has gripped them, but it will never disappear from the world at the mere sight of our superior point of view (Jung 1964, 85).

4.1 An overview of Freudian theory

Freud's theory is filled with a plethora of interconnected concepts that cannot be fully understood in a vacuum such as ego, id, super-ego, reality and pleasure principle, Eros, libido, death instinct, unconscious, pre-conscious, cathexis, complex, Nirvana principle, repression and sublimation. Not all of them are directly relevant to play but the systemic and holistic nature of Freudianism forces me to explore most of its central aspects. The most essential concepts here are the primal instincts and reality and pleasure principles because it is the tension between these that leads Freud to adopt a pessimistic view towards civilisation. In essence, the existence of a destructive death instinct makes it necessary to heavily repress the instincts if civilisation is to be preserved, which creates an unconscious sense of guilt or a need for punishment¹³ manifesting as suffering and pathologies (Freud 1961a). These instincts and the needs imposed by them are a part of the pleasure principle, a facet of mental functioning indifferent to external reality and the limits set by it. Reality principle, on the other hand, is concerned with what is outside ego and how one needs to consider it to actually be able to fulfil any wishes that depend on external matters. (Freud 1958.) Even though the latter is what allows the former to attain most of its goals in the first place, it also takes over the former's prevailing status and strictly limits its wishes, which results in repressive opposition. This is reminiscent of the theme of unreality in opposition to the external world that is central to play even though the pleasure principle is not the same as play. One important connection is phantasy, a form of thought-activity expressing only the pleasure principle, that also forms a central part of play (Freud 1958, 222). Consequently, the opposition of these two principles of mental functioning corresponds to the opposition of play and earnestness and overcoming it is a central goal.

¹³ Unconscious sense of guilt, despite being used by Freud, is an inaccurate expression because unconscious feeling is an oxymoron on the basis of the conscious ego being the locus of all sensuousness (Freud 1961b, 25–26).

The idea of repressing aggression leading into guilt and suffering should strike as peculiar and understanding this notion requires an understanding of the broader personality structure and the functioning of instincts. All psychical functioning is driven by instinctual energy, with a large part of it being libidinal in nature. Orientation towards something is formed in a process called cathexis (an investment or allocation of instinctual energy) that aims at discharge, which often cannot be fully accomplished. (Freud 1961b.) This is the process that constitutes the reality principle in individual development that always begins with autoerotic narcissism (Freud 1957, 134). It refers to an ego that judges as internal everything pleasurable and as external anything that it feels indifferently about. However, some internal stimuli turn out to be unpleasurable, creating a pleasure-ego that incorporates everything pleasurable to itself and rejects anything unpleasurable as external. (Freud 1957, 135–136.) Once it starts to notice that the fulfilment of certain desires depends on matters beyond its control (muscular action), an object cathexis (the breast that feeds is often the earliest example of this kind of object) is established, with the reality principle being formed alongside this. Consequently, a reality-ego is introduced to replace the preceding pleasure-ego and the stage for the development of a mature personality is set. (Freud 1961a, 66–68.) Notwithstanding, the pleasure principle remains as a driving force deep in the individual with Freud even declaring its simple aim of maximising pleasure and minimising unpleasure as the purpose of human life (Freud 1961a, 76).

The two primal instincts, Eros and Thanatos¹⁴, are both related to this aim. In short, Eros “seeks to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units” (Freud 1961a, 118), which is clearly demonstrated by the general tendency towards self-preservation in life and the need and desire for sexual intercourse. Though, in spite of the uniting power of Eros, even it has not been allowed to function freely. One reason lies in the reality principle since for most of human existence the satisfaction of basic needs has required a large amount of toil that forces one to postpone the discharge of libidinal cathexis and displace it (Freud 1961a, 104). This is the basis of sublimation and aim-inhibited affection which forms non-sexual relationships and love. In fact, the entire civilisation is built on aim-inhibited libidinal ties between people. (Freud 1961a, 108–109.) Thanatos, on the other hand, seeks to dissolve the matter that Eros unites and return living substance to tensionless inorganic state (Freud 1961a, 118–119). The origin of the death instinct is made more comprehensible by the Nirvana principle, which is a primitive version of the pleasure principle. The Nirvana principle corresponds to the aim of avoiding unpleasure since it strives for stability that is most readily afforded by the state of inorganic being against the unpleasant tensions of life. This principle is later

¹⁴ Freud never used the term Thanatos himself but instead simply spoke of the death instinct. However, the use of the word Thanatos has become so widespread with later scholars and works as a counterpart to Eros so well that I consider this departure from Freud’s language justified.

modified into the pleasure principle by the influence of libido, which explains why there are a myriad of cases of pleasurable excitation and unpleasurable lowering of tension. However, the death instinct, whose trend was expressed by the Nirvana principle, remains even though it too becomes modified and turns partially outwards. (Freud 1991, 274–275.) It is essential to note that Freud considers these two instincts often fused and uses this notion to explain that it is Eros that binds and redirects the impulses of Thanatos. Therefore, erotic impulses cannot reign free and let humans form unrepressed ties with each other, leaving larger societal ties up to work and mutual interests. In this scenario there would be nothing to bind the natural tendency to aggression in large-scale relations between people, which dissolves the entire civilisation. To hold a culture together, its binding forces need to be withdrawn from libido and become heavily sublimated, presenting heavy restrictions on sexuality (Freud 1961a, 112.) This is one of the sources of the opposition between the two principles of mental functioning.

Here we have the basis of the aggressiveness that needs to be repressed but it is still uncertain how this repression leads to discontent (Ubenhagen). The answer lies in the dynamic of external and internal orientations and the internalisation of authority. The latter refers to the super-ego (or ego ideal) which develops ontogenetically on the model of the authority set by a parent (Freud 1961b, 34). As described above, the pleasure principle initially reigns free and wants complete control of what gives the individual pleasure. An unlimited effort to fulfil every want, however, becomes a hindrance to this goal in practice since the individual is limited in their capacity and dependent on others without whom one would be helpless. Therefore, the loss of love is the most threatening and anxiety-inducing thought imaginable to a developing individual, which makes compliance to the demands of authority necessary. The need to consider these demands is so high that a super-ego is formed to take over the task of enforcing them internally. (Freud 1961a, 124–125.) The attitude towards the external enforcer is ambivalent since their restrictions engenders aggressiveness towards them but the necessity to renounce these aggressions and to submit is managed by identifying with the authority (Freud 1961b, 31–32). The key difference between an external and internal authority is that nothing can be hidden from the latter, not even a wish to do something condemnable (Freud 1961a, 125). Thus, conscience is formed by the renunciation of forbidden impulses, and their continued renunciation (enforced by the super-ego) only continues to make conscience even harsher by making it rage against the ego. This raging is the expression of expected punishment from an authority if only they knew what the ego had wished. The super-ego obviously knows and does not hold back, which leads to the unconscious need for punishment and titular discontent. (Freud 1961a, 129.) In this manner the tension between different components of personality is similar to the tension between individual wishes and external limits and requirements (Freud 1961b, 36). Freud recognises

different ways to ease this pain with all of them being little more than vain attempts to escape the inescapable suffering. The one that gets particularly close to my discussion of play is the option to use imagination and create an additional world according to one's wishes, which is presented as escapism that can even lead to madness. (Freud 1961a, 80–81.) This is hardly emancipatory at all.

Alongside individual development and individual superego a cultural superego develops to work on a collective level even if the parallels do not cover everything (Freud 1961a, 142). This is an example of a broader theme of connecting phylogenetic and ontogenetic development in Freudian thinking. I have mostly focused on the latter, but it is not complete without the former, especially in the context of social philosophy. The development of civilisation is traced back to what Freud calls the primal horde, a primitive family ruled by a tyrannical father. His unrestrained use of power to attain whatever he wants causes hate in those that are controlled, leading to a literal killing of the father. However, they also felt love towards this figure and this ambivalence leads into remorse. The emerging band of brothers understands that repeating this discharge of hate is a threat and it must be forbidden to keep the social unit stable and protect the lives of its members. As time passes, a number of taboos are developed, often with no conscious memory of their source, which is the origin of the cultural superego (Freud 2004, 164–167). This marks a beginning of civilisation because it was built on the renunciation of instincts (Freud 1961a, 97), and abolishing the original tyranny of force made internalised abstaining on a large scale necessary for the first time.

The main takeaway here is that Freud sees the discontent as a problem of the civilisation itself, locating the source at its very essence. As long as there has been culture and as long as it will exist, it demands a repressive renunciation of instincts, which turns the superego against the self. The option to circumvent this renunciation could lead to unfathomable horrors and to the dissolution of the entire society. The desperation of this situation is why Freud calls the social source of suffering perhaps the most painful of the three main sources he identifies (Freud 1961a, 77). The other two are the power of nature and the feebleness of our bodies, including our unavoidable death (Freud 1961a, 86). Even though the first (Freud mentioned it third) source is related to relations between people, it might just as well be linked to forces of nature since its origin is in unsolvable tensions between an individual and their surroundings. It is linked to biology and unmalleable personality structures that do not leave any room for utopia. According to Freud, it can be a phantasy divorced from reality at best. This is basically an extremely elaborate way of saying that one cannot freely fulfil their wishes because reality and human nature do not allow our civilisation to remain stable (a necessary precondition for fulfilling human needs) if that is attempted. Any utopia, especially a playful one, would be literally unrealistic since it is little more than an expression of phantasy hearkening back to a more primitive stage of individual development.

Or so Freud thought.

4.2 Marcuse's subversion of Freud's conclusions

Despite the insistence on the eternal antagonism between reality and pleasure principles, individual and society, Eros and Thanatos and consequently work and play¹⁵, Freud's reasoning includes some important cracks that threaten his conclusions. For instance, even though he responds to communists and is willing to give some credit to the idea that the (then-)prevailing relations of ownership and production are a historically contingent source of hostility and suffering (Freud 1961a, 143), he seems unable to conceive work beyond its existing forms. This is evident by the fact that he talks about "natural aversion to work" and fails to consider the role of alienation and its abolition when concluding that this aversion necessitates repression (Freud 1961a, 80). The same problem haunts the idea of free sexuality only creating pairs of people who have no libidinal energy to spare for relations in larger collectives (Freud 1961a, 108) even though Freud is capable of questioning monogamy a few pages earlier in the same text (Freud 1961a, 105). Both, among others, are necessary parts in his reasoning, which casts doubt upon the condemnation of utopia. A critical scrutiny of these shortcomings can potentially uncover radical possibilities. Herbert Marcuse (1974) has noticed this and provides a strong conceptual basis for undermining Freud's pessimism. It is not just about disproving a conceptual obstacle but unfolding a radical promise that Freud introduced when he discovered hidden memories and promises that provide critical standards for evaluating repressive social structures. Marcuse calls this progressive potential the hidden trend in psychoanalysis (1974, 19).

Two conceptual supplementations that introduce the critical potential of Marxism to psychoanalysis are the performance principle and surplus repression. The former represents the idea that the reality principle discussed by Freud is not *the* reality principle but one of its historical forms typical for capitalism. It designates the psychological dimension of Marxism i.e., the demands, restrictions and experiences an individual faces in an antagonistic society of domination, including alienation and repressive sublimations that are a part of this order (Marcuse 1974, 45). Surplus repression is the conceptual counterpart that refers to unnecessary repression that cannot be explained as unavoidable suffering based on the unalterable psychical constitution of humans (Marcuse 1974, 35). Thus, the eternal antagonism between Eros and the reality principle is re-framed as a historically contingent conflict between Eros and the alienation of the performance principle. Marcuse, however, is strict about holding on to the original biological orientation of Freudianism instead of replacing its fundamental concepts with sociological ones (like many Neo-

¹⁵ Work and play do not correspond to Eros and Thanatos but their oppositions are a part of the same whole.

Freudians do) (1974, epilogue).

Marcuse also links Freud's theory of instincts to the broader Critical theory with particularly strong ties to its perception of enlightenment. The destructive mindset that seeks to turn nature into a mass of rationally controllable matter to be deconstructed, diffused and reorganised is explained as the work of Thanatos. It does not stop at inorganic matter but submits life and ultimately humans to the same totalising administration. (Marcuse 1974, 86-87.) This is connected to the observation that the domination in civilisation has not been the same since the birth of culture but has, instead, changed dialectically. Marcuse argues that the traditional Freudian model of personal Oedipal complexes is insufficient due to them becoming increasingly impersonal and rational as a part of the broader apparatus that swallows individuals and turns them into representatives of a part of the social division of labour. (Marcuse 1974, 90.) The power in society is diffused instead of being exercised by privileged individuals against the less powerful¹⁶. Therefore, there are no masters against whom to rebel but a colourful collection of servants of the same system that has attained an agency of its own. Simultaneously the super-ego changes too since it is formed by this depersonalised and rationalised domination instead of internalisation through personal identification, leading to a diminishing difference between personal and cultural super-egos. (Marcuse 1974, 96-99.) The described development of the performance principle, however, creates the conditions for its abolishment when the alienation becomes so divorced from humanity that humanity can divorce itself from the fully alienated production (Marcuse 1974, 105).

To explore this development more closely would be to engage in a Marxist analysis of economics, which is not my focus. I am interested in understanding what it means to turn human existence into play, and contextualising Freud's contribution to this theme as an expression of the deepest currents in the history of philosophy is beneficial to this goal. It is also what ultimately gives Freud's theory the value that I attribute to it and provides a critical perspective towards it. Marcuse interprets Freudianism as a theory that explores and explains the fundamental questions of human existence that philosophy has engaged with since its inception. The deification of Logos corresponds to the prevalence of the reality principle at the cost of gratification and those faculties that bow to the pleasure principle (Marcuse 1974, 111). The interpretation of Logos as "ordering, classifying, mastering reason" (Marcuse 1974, 111) antagonistic towards those components of humanity that it deems irrational and wants to contain and submit to reason contains the same basic idea as Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002) effort to trace enlightenment back to classical myths.

Philosophy has not remained content with this antagonism but has

¹⁶ The same phenomenon has been noted by Foucault (1980) who called this new form of power discipline and analysed its manifestations from a slightly different perspective.

sought to reconcile it ever since Ancient Greece with Aristotle's conception of existence defined by itself, a being-in-and-for-itself (Marcuse 1974, 112). In this vein Hegel is perhaps the culmination point of western reason interpreting itself and reconciling its oppositional conflicts, but it achieves this only conceptually. Simultaneously, the concrete historical world can never embody the freedom only found in the idea, which means that the system ultimately stays trapped within the established reality principle. Therefore, proceeding forward represents a kind of end of philosophy that forced scholars such as Marx to seek reconciliation within the material world once the potential of philosophy was exhausted. (Marcuse 2000.) In this case, Nietzsche steps forward as an even more relevant thinker who put temporality into focus with the concept of eternal return. It brings eternity from the transcendent world into concreteness and finiteness while celebrating the abandonment of guilt, repression and submission (Marcuse 1974, 123). The transcendent eternity of conceptual reconciliation of antagonisms juxtaposed to concrete being in an alienated and repressive flux of time is a division that must be conquered to reconcile reality and pleasure principles. This is the significance that Marcuse attributes to Eros in Freud's thought that gives an expression to the latent will of gratification at the core of philosophy. The oceanic feeling of being one with the eternal world has much more significance than simply being a regression to an earlier form of ego as Freud thought (1961a, 72). The parallels to play are clear. As an activity free and complete in itself, play can represent the fulfilment of the life instinct, and its capability to induce flow allows play to overcome the restrictions of time.

However, the possibility of a non-repressive civilisation in Freud's theory still needs to be demonstrated. Additional holes can be poked at his reasoning by examining the idea of external and internal causes in the development of instincts more closely. Marcuse notes that Freud even attributes the inception of death instinct to external disturbances from which the organism seeks peace whereas the latter shift into more fully developed and sublimated Eros and Thanatos happens due to the struggle for existence (19974, 135-136). The latter is what begins the whole process of increasing need for punishment, weakening Eros and repressive taboos that Freud saw as the source of discontent and danger in civilisation. Uncovering the fact that the instincts themselves are historically formed instead of being unchangeable monoliths that just interact with different circumstances leads one to question if the external conditions could change in such a way that the functioning of instincts changes. The tendency of these instincts to be fused together and the binding function that Eros has over Thanatos shifts the attention to the life instinct. If the freedom from necessity and struggle for existence allows Eros to become stronger when it is let free, it can contain the aggressive impulses that civilisation formed to renunciate (Marcuse 1974, 139).

This calls for a closer inspection of the concepts of Eros and sexuality.

They (and their derivatives) are often used interchangeably but when the formation of Eros and the first erotic impulses in ontogenetic development are taken into account, Eros turns out to be a broader concept than sexuality. This holds true at least when sexuality is understood in a common sense as a collection of specific kinds of desires, acts and pleasures that attain their form in a complex process of development¹⁷. For instance, the concept of sexuality does not fit well with an infant whose pleasure principle is still dominant and pursues a conquest of the parent who has proven to be a source of pleasure and a reliever of unpleasure. Making this distinction is necessary when testing the conceptual possibility of free Eros. Otherwise, we would be confined to conceiving it as a quantitative increase of sexuality. Marcuse speaks of spread rather than of an explosion of libido when he introduces the idea of eroticism being freed from spatial (genital supremacy) and temporal constraints to eroticise the entire body as a source of pleasure in all human relations (1974, 201-202). In this dialectical development sexuality would cease to be sexuality as it currently appears but become its true fulfilment as free Eros. In order to make this possible, alienation and ungratifying toil would have to be abolished. Relying on said change begs for an explanation of the source of energy to do the remaining socially useful work.

This represents an abandonment of Freud's claims that free libidinal gratification would draw all energy away from work and that sublimation is always repressive, which weakens Eros and unleashes Thanatos. The first thing to note is the dissolution of the distinction between public and private without which there would be no conflict between non-repressive libidinal relations of people and socially useful activities. In other words, the disappearance of alienated labour allows every social relation to become freely libidinal when there is no separate public sphere of work demanding constant ungratifying effort. This is what leads Marcuse to adopt the idea of non-repressive sublimation as a basis for work in post-labour world. The new form of sublimation is another dialectical development that retains the nature of sublimation insofar as the instinctual energy is directed at something other than genital sexuality but also introduces a drastic change since the erotic impulse is not deflected from its original aim (Marcuse 1974, 212). Following these remarks and Barbara Lantos's article, Marcuse (1974, 214) proceeds to define play as an activity that is determined by the pleasure principle and "objectless autoeroticism" whereas work serves external purposes. This, in turn, leads him to conclude that it is not the content but the purpose of the activity which makes something work or play and that polymorphous eroticism following the conquest of scarcity and alienation creates the instinctual basis for turning work into play (Marcuse 1974, 215). Again, it would be more appropriate to speak of play as an aspect of human activity rather than as an activity per se and this is how Marcuse

¹⁷ Foucault (1998) has provided an extensive examination of the historicalness of sexuality complementing this theme.

(1974, 215) seems to view the concept too when he stresses that the work content remains even though he does not use this terminology. Thus, play as an emancipatory force receives a decisive erotic quality that allows it to libidinise socially useful activities.

Finally, the strengthened Eros can absorb Thanatos whose origin lies in the Nirvana principle that seeks to relieve painful tensions that only incidentally make it turn against life. When life is no longer defined by unpleasant tensions and suffering, the conflict between pleasure and Nirvana dissolves and the aggressive manifestations of the death instincts should become increasingly obsolete. (Marcuse 1974, 234–235.) Hence the instinctual dynamic that Freud used to demonstrate the impossibility of culture defined by gratifying play is reversed and the destructive tendencies are shown to be historically contingent. Moreover, those components of personality that seek gratification that the oppressive and repressive reality cannot afford deep in the unconscious turned out to be the radical force behind the potential of play.

4.3 Subversive aesthetics

The instinctual basis for a civilisation of play has been justified, which leaves us with two ways of being in different social orders: the repressive alienation of capitalism and free libidinal play in a world with a new reality principle in harmony with pleasure. Unfortunately, simply having these two alternatives does not get us anywhere even if we accept that the latter is possible. The starting point is still a situation where the pleasure and reality principles are antagonistic to each other i.e., reality is viewed through the lens of the performance principle and its logic of domination whereas the pleasure principle is divorced from the reality that it needs to change. These two faculties have incompatible truth values, but they must somehow be brought together to dissolve their tension. This is the challenge of play being unrealistic that I have been hinting at. Fortunately, the solution is afforded by aesthetics, which even Freud (1958, 224) acknowledges when he asserts that art can reconcile the two oppositional principles. This special quality is based on the fact that phantasy became the thought activity associated with the pleasure principle once the reality principle was established, making art an expression of the unique truths of phantasy.

Marcuse bases his account of aesthetics on the Kantian theory where judgement, the aesthetic dimension, is the central faculty between practical and theoretical reason, freedom and necessity and reason and sensuousness (1974, 174). Comprehending an object through this faculty aesthetically is to view it “purposefully without purpose” in its pure form without any additional relations or properties. It is thus released into free being and from this kind of comprehension a

unique pleasure emerges in the manifestation of beauty. The laws that govern imagination of this kind are also free instead of enforcing some specific ends. (Marcuse 1974, 177–179.) Marcuse asserts that sensuousness is being dominated by reason and frames aesthetics as a science of sensuousness just as logic is the science of understanding. This science can represent truths that sensuousness recognises yet reason rejects. (Marcuse 1974, 183.) As sensuousness pertains to the pleasure principle, aesthetics is essentially a science that reveals this principle even when it is trapped away from reality.

While the Kantian conception only links aesthetic judgement to mental faculties, Friedrich Schiller (2004) took the general framework and moulded aesthetics into a political category in the series of letters titled *On the aesthetic education of man*. I am aware of the inclination to make an anachronistic interpretation but the content in these letters seems to fit remarkably well with my research interests and Critical theory, especially for a pre-Marxist and pre-Hegelian amateur philosopher. It taps in the same vein as the other philosophers that discussed the fundamental antagonisms of civilisation (and their reconciliation) and even ends up emphasising play as the ultimate form of reconciliation that makes humanity complete (Schiller 2004, letter 15).

Marcuse (1974, 193) notes how the two impulses that Schiller named the sensuous and form impulse correspond to the pleasure and reality principles and their hostile relation. The former is passive and receptive whereas the latter is mastering and domineering, with culture being formed by the interaction of these impulses (Marcuse 1974, 186). The third impulse that is introduced to reconcile their antagonism is dubbed the play impulse, which is evident by the fact that Schiller names life and shape as the objects of sensuous and form impulse, respectively, while calling the object of the play impulse “living shape” (Schiller 2004, letter 15). The emerging play is not play with something but the play of life itself, free from constraint. Since reality necessarily presents a number of constraints, this play also turns out to be freedom from established reality with an indifferent attitude towards it (Marcuse 1974, 187–188). The new world of play would be less real insofar as the word “realistic” invokes connotations of needs, wants and necessities. It cannot be stressed enough that this is not only a subjective change but a radical change in the world and in our relations with it i.e., the material revolution and the conquest of scarcity bring with themselves a change in the entire concept of reality and the way that it is perceived. Objects manifest according to the laws of beauty when they are freed from the dominating logic of the performance principle. This is the way that imagination comprehends reality when human existence is free play (Marcuse 1974, 189).

Thus, the artificiality or the quality of being unrealistic turns out to be an indispensable part of the critical potential of play even though it first presented itself as a problem. And while my argumentation does not support the straight-forward

interpretation that utopia can be achieved by playing, the role that aesthetics came to assume in the end does support critical playful design as a valuable tool. It is true that aesthetics does not only refer to art but play and games as art represent one of the most appropriate ways to fulfil the described aesthetic potential. The reason is found in the richness of the word sensuousness. Art and aesthetics all too easily correspond to ideas that are confined to visual or auditory stimuli whereas play can present an all-encompassing experience that manages to combine receptive abilities more holistically. Marcuse notes in his last work *The aesthetic dimension* (1978, 4–5) that art allows an individual to step outside¹⁸ the relations governed by the performance principle and discover an existence that is the full realisation of their potentialities. However, this step is only temporary and cannot constitute a free existence but instead provides a demonstration of free being to be pursued against the unfulfilling existing reality. Even though Marcuse mainly focused on literature, hardly anything can fit this function better than play. Hence, we finally have two roles for play informed by aesthetics: the first as a way of free being at the height of mature civilisation and the second as a form of revolutionary art.

¹⁸ The quality of creating an opportunity to take a clear departure from the existing social world cannot be stressed enough. One of the main problems of the culture industry is that its products cannot be too demanding since they are supposed to offer easy relief from the ungratifying work life whose numbing beats they are ironically forced to repeat (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, 109). A radical work of art that designates a different kind of world and existence does not lend itself for light entertainment nearly as easily, but its boldness should not be compromised. Capitalism is already more than efficient enough at appropriating visions with revolutionary potential to serve as sanitised commodities.

5. CONCLUSION

I began by invoking intuitive notions of play and their connotations of gratification that could contain a critical promise of a different kind of existence. This was followed by a more critical examination that tackled some pivotal conceptual challenges and ultimately the compatibility with the deepest structures of our personality. In the end I feel it is safe to say that play has a clear radical potential as a model for humane existence in a post-scarcity world. It corresponds to the romantic notion of comprehending and enjoying reality through the laws of beauty.

The other role of play as revolutionary art deserves further examination as it is a topic that I little more than hinted at. It is also a theme that is little explored in academia, at least to my knowledge. And with this I mean radical aesthetic design of play that is conceived with the emancipatory ideals of the Critical theory in mind instead of utilising some playful way to participate in contemporary politics. Beyond the function of invalidating oppressive conditions, game design could also have an important role in utopia as a response to the objection that life could become boring and meaningless in a world where everything is easy, automated and pleasurable. The reason is obvious given that game design is *the* way to come up with meaningful and enjoyable challenges that are artificial. This is the fulfilment of the ideal that humans give their own meanings and laws as free agents instead of succumbing to external necessities and to the struggle for existence.

Another topic that is deserving of further study is psychoanalysis. Following the example of the early Frankfurt school, I limited my perspective to Freud to maintain focus. However, psychoanalysis and psychology have come a

long way since then and possibly proven some Freudian assumptions wrong even though I still defend his general approach against positivist critique.

Notwithstanding, considering later theorists would greatly supplement my argumentation and viewing it in the light of their insights would help me hone my views to be more accurate. In any case, the ultimate value that I attribute to the Freudian approach is its ability to express the fundamental antagonisms in culture and give a voice to those faculties that are silenced by repression yet yearn for gratification.

Finally, in spite of the significance for the development of civilisation that play has, its promise should not be overstressed. It is ultimately a theoretical goal that gives a meaning to political struggles which are not mere play. I am not able to answer how the material changes that are needed to realise a playful existence for humans should be executed in practice, but I do know that it will not be easy. In the end, aesthetics is only one beneficial tool that does not bring about a communist paradise by itself. But while it is essential to recognise these limits, they should not be confused with impossibility or a reason for hopelessness. It is precisely because utopia is unrealistic that we should be more, rather than less radical.

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