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Let's not play: Interpassivity as resistance in 'Let's Play' videos

ABSTRACT

This article examines contemporary practices of 'idling' (playing 'idle games') and 'let's playing' (watching 'Let's Play' [LP] videos of performed gameplay) as forms of power and resistance in the attention economy. Through the prism of interpassivity, a theory developed by Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek, it establishes idling as relegating certain enjoyment from gameplay to the machine, while reproducing the anxieties associated with digital work as a whole. LPs, on the other hand, position the viewer as a critical analyst rather than a hands-on player. This vicarious experience of delegating play to others can allow avoidance and disengagement, which in turn may allow for a critical examination of the system as whole. As I will argue in this article, such interpassive practices can thus be seen as forms of resistance enabling users to step outside the controlling mechanism of digital media and the associated cybernetic feedback loops.

KEYWORDS

interpassivity
control
Let's Play videos
idle games
ludic resistance
digital labour
quantification
gamification

You've been logged out due to inactivity.

(BlackBoard's expired session message)

I sit in front of a screen, in anticipation of leisure. This screen looks similar to the screen that engrossed me in the office. It is similar in its general shape and functionality to the one I have used with my wife earlier that evening to consume our serialized entertainment. It differs somewhat in its size from the smaller screen I carry around in my pocket all day, but ultimately operates according to similar principles. Yet, this screen is unique, because this is my gaming screen. Unlike all others, it allows me to access my PC, which has the capacity to run the specialized, resource-demanding software that enables my immersion into the simulated worlds of my hobby. As a grown-up, with work and family life taking increasingly larger proportion of my time, this is a rare moment of self-indulgence.

And yet, my hand on the mouse pauses. Continuing a previous session of a game begun a week ago seems suddenly rather boring. Starting a new one – perhaps one of the many I have bought at a discount yet never installed – appears daunting and requires far too much of the mental energy I have left by now. Almost instinctively, I open the Internet browser on my screen. Unlike the changing contours of the screen, this secondary, internal frame is much more consistent, as it syncs across multiple devices and remembers my preferences. Pausing for a second over the social media bookmarks, I type into the address bar the first three letters from the name of a YouTuber I follow: Quill18. The browser does the rest and autocompletes it into the full address of the channel, which I enter. I scan latest uploads and notice a 'Let's Play' (LP) – a video depicting recorded gameplay with commentary – of the game I was so reluctant to play before. I also notice the neat time stamp next to it, 28:22. This immediately becomes a plus, as launching the game myself at this hour in the evening has a particular danger of lost hours and a difficult morning. Here, the time code presents a known quality: I will experience gameplay vicariously through this YouTuber for exactly 28 minutes 22 seconds. Then, I will be free again.

Why am I willing to watch someone else play the same game I am not willing to play myself? After all, is not the point of a game in its execution? A (video) game is a 'series of interesting decisions' (Alexander 2012) as often stated by *Civilization's* creator Sid Meier. According to him, the art of designing a videogame lies (mostly in) in providing the player with those decisions, while presenting their respective trade-offs and consequence in a way that is informational but not straightforward. The player then makes an informed decision based on the choice provided by the game designer, and their own personal play-style. A series of such choices and their lingering effects then create emergent complexity as they cascade of each other, constituting the game experience for the players (Consalvo 2009; cf. Juul 2005). Gamification researcher Jane McGonigal claims that one thing that makes games an effective 'remedy' to apply onto non-gaming context is how such choices are often clearly communicated and how making them leads to an immediate feedback, which she calls 'blissful work' (McGonigal 2011: 53). In her book she laments that those clear guidelines and the ability to learn from one's mistake are sorely lacking in modern labour process and advised future employers to implement structures similar to those of Massively Multiplayer Games (MMOs) into their training and rewarding processes. Many employers have since done so.

This article explores the logic of game spectatorship, delegated play (Fizek 2018a) and their relation to the media environments we inhabit today. The same things that make videogames enjoyable – carefully curated interaction loops, clear conditions of success and failures, immediate feedback – have become integrated into our work routines with the rise of efficiency management and gamification (Gordon and Walter 2016; Sampson 2016). Quantification and gamification of the workplace are in turn linked intrinsically to anxiety and stress of the worker (Moore and Robinson 2016; Rossiter 2015), recounting the early warnings of virtual worlds' economics (Terranova 2000; Castronova 2005). In parallel, via the endless proliferation of similar-yet-different screens, our leisure time growingly resemble our work time, and vice versa as part of an ongoing process that has been referred to as ludic capitalism (Galloway 2012), cognitive capitalism (Moulier-Boutang 2012) or the attention economy (Crogan and Kinsley 2012; Marwick 2015; Terranova 2012). Social media networks in particular occupy a peculiar space between leisure and labour, where the language of metrics and measurement, reminiscent of seemingly meritocratic environments such as education and work, invade the logic of social life (Beer 2015; Grosser 2014). The multiplicity of screens and their similarity mentioned in the opening paragraphs is not merely a reflection on my own working routine, but rather a comment on the way games, much like other types of software, should be seen as the ongoing 'streams' of information that are aggregated and managed by various digital platforms and the organization behind them in order to target and influence consumer cognition (Berry 2014).

My main claim is that LPs can be understood as a form of resistance to such colonization of thought, as they allow one to reduce the anxiety of using digital media, which collapses work and play into similar patterns, and step outside the controlling mechanisms that such media embodies. Using the conceptual framework of *interpassivity* (Pfaller 2017b; Schölzel 2017; Van Oenen 2008; Žizek 1998) I will argue that they allow for such resistance by creating an alternative to straightforward consumption of the game.

I begin by briefly presenting contemporary discourse on interpassivity. I show that by positioning it as a defiant stance to modern apparatus of sustained engagement, what political communications theorist Schölzel (2017) calls 'circles of control', one can begin to conceive of a non-binary distinction between play and non-play (Malaby 2007). Schölzel's work allows me to offer a hybrid read of interpassivity, based on both Pfaller's and Van Oenen's takes on the concept (elaborate below). Through his work, I suggest how in a constant state of interactive media's demand for feedback, vicariously experiencing gameplay through others can be constitutive of gestures of avoidance and disengagement – thus acknowledging in part media's demands on one's self. The interpassive actor allows for the cybernetic system to operate without responding to their always-on logic, allowing for critical examination of the system as whole. By removing themselves from the equation, such actor enacts a form of protocological resistance that comes from within the system of control, rather than from without (Galloway 2004), a feedback loop that keeps the mechanisms of regulation occupied, while s/he 'steps outside' and experiences freedom (Chun 2008). This conceptualization of interpassivity-as-resistance can be linked to the phenomenon of mechanical resonance in physics: a closed system that oscillates with greater and greater force due to an external input matching in frequency that can lead to catastrophic results in bridges and buildings. By automating various aspects of one's leisure to accommodate the growing

1. For a more in depth discussion of automatization and pleasure, see Ruffino's (2016) discussion on NikeFuel, specifically on the comparison between crowd sourcing and self-quantifying; also, Fizek's (2018) contribution on the automated state of play.

needs of the attention economy, the possibility of escaping the pervasiveness of leisure (now indistinguishable from work) emerges.

To examine such interpassive resistance I turn to two examples from contemporary digital gaming culture, where 'if anything else, games have been described as inherently interactive [...] oftentimes in contrast to non-interactive or less interactive such as films or books' (Fizek 2018: 141); first I look at 'idle' or 'clicker' games, specifically the popular title *Idle Heroes of the Forgotten Realms*. Through Sonia Fizek's work on games' interpassivity and delegated play I examine the possible stance of avoidance in this particular game. I suggest that through interpassive nature, the game still partially adheres to the same problematic structures as more 'active' kinds of games. My second example returns to the opening anecdote of this article and posit LPs as potentially more effective form of interpassive resistance. In this last section I review some prominent existing work on LPs (Burwell and Miller 2016; Glas 2015; Postigo 2016) and offer a conjunctive explanations on why people watch others play video games through the theory of interpassivity. The section focuses on the LP of the game *Aurora4x* by YouTube LPer Quill18. Methodologically, I follow the suggestion of Pfaller (2017a) on using a 'Žižekian toolbox' in order to critically examine dominant ideologies through the juxtaposition of cultural artefacts. I use those two (relatively) new phenomena to draw conclusions about the types of actions possible in post-digital media to reflect on their encoded rules of transmission and the cultures that arise from them (Galloway 2004). Therefore, I wish to (continuously) remind the reader that both the idle game and the LP do not serve as mere case studies, but rather a constitutive part of my ongoing genealogy of play, labour and leisure in post-digital societies.

Interpassive intermediaries

Interpassivity theory focuses on the ability to delegate experiences to someone or something other than the experiencing subject, and through such delegation enjoy the act vicariously. It differs from other forms of delegation documented in (post) modern environments by focussing on assigning something the subject *enjoys*. Thus, when we pay someone to do work for us or carry out our chores we acknowledge that such activities are necessary, but unwanted.¹ In contrast, interpassive subjects delegate their pleasures, hobbies and past-times to others (Pfaller 2017b). Common examples include photocopying books in order to not read them or using a VCR to record television programmes without ever watching them. The point of the exercise is not to deceive but rather – to some extent – to offload the need to process cultural artefacts into a static medium, the mere possession of which is sufficient. Non-media examples often discuss the automatization of faith via prayer wheels or the consumption of alcohol *on* behalf of an individual unable or unwilling to drink, who nonetheless enjoys the act as a display of comradeship or generosity ('I cannot drink it, but do so for me, will you?') Interpassivity theory is grounded in philosophical discourse. Introduced and popularized towards the end of the twentieth century through the works of philosophers Pfaller (2017b) and Žižek (1998), it never gained much traction in media theory. This, despite the common use of (new) media technologies to present and exemplify central tenets of the theory throughout its life, especially so by Žižek. Part of the reason is perhaps found in the Pfaller's original intention – in his own words – to 'relativise and water down the overwhelming dominance at the time of the discourse of interactivity [...] now largely vanished

into thin air' (Pfaller 2017b: 2). Starting from the art world but swiftly extending his criticism towards the rising tide of cyberculture and new-media theories, Pfaller denounced notions of participation and interactive audiences as

[...] a revival of very old wishes and utopias which had become unquestioned facts – consequently this discourse [of interactivity] was more of an ideology than a theory. Contrary to this, the thinking of interpassivity consisted of a series of disturbing observations, questions and considerations, regarding which initially no one – not even those who advanced them – knew where they would lead. It is precisely this uncertainty and openness that distinguishes a theory from an ideology.

(2017b: 3)

Granted, at the time of the writing some new media theorists, artists and practitioners proselytized the revolutionary potentials of new media technologies and spaces, in relation to communication, identity formation and/or political action (Kurzweil 2000; cf. Negroponte 1995; Rheingold 2002). However, and not necessarily fully represented in Pfaller's critique, a similarly large (if not larger) contingent of media and communication scholars have been engaged with the ongoing project of debunking and critiquing the promises of new media technologies' inherent democratization and other vestiges of what it time came to be known as the 'Californian ideology' (Turner 2008). Mirko Tobias Schäfer's work explicitly challenges the notion of participation even in such resistance-seeming practices as hardware hacking and modding (Schäfer 2011). Yet with its outright hostility towards new media technologies, alongside strong reliance on Lacanian psychoanalysis among other continental philosophical traditions, interpassivity never really caught on in media theory (Taylor 2009) and even those engaged in critical and psychoanalytic takes on media theory often relate to in passing (Samuels 2010). Interpassivity has gravitated to be a theory about media but without media, while media studies explored the growing role of automation and delegation of cognitive capacities to non-humans without acknowledging the interpassive components of these practices. The overall goal of this article is to reconcile those two strands. Specifically, in line with this themed issue and previous work, I see interpassivity as an excellent analytical frame for exploring the many processes occurring in digital gaming – electronic media's native-born type of leisure, acknowledged as the largest cultural industry in the world (McDonald 2017). In the remainder of this section I will review existing work on interpassivity in media to establish it as a possible way of participating (and not participating) in the growing value extraction of the videogames ecosystem.

Beyond its aim to spite interactivity (and later, participation) enthusiasts, interpassivity thus entails the delegation of enjoyment to other (human and non-human) agents. This is a double move, that according to Pfaller entails, first, a conscious choice of transferring something perceived as enjoyable onto another, and – second – the creation of 'naïve others' who might be real or imaginary observers that also believe in the first transfer in your stead. I will exemplify this, coming back to Pfaller-Žižek's famous VCR example.

If you are anything like me, you have – at some point in your life – come up with a system to store intriguing snippets of online information for 'later'. Be it through the use of some bookmarking functionality, an external service (i.e. Pocket) or merely by exploiting tabbed capabilities of modern web browsers, the act of 'I will not read/ watch this now but surely do so later' is a familiar

2. Exemplified by the trend to enjoy things 'ironically' by hipsters everywhere (Haddow 2008).
3. Popular gaming media, such as Kotaku or Polygon, dedicate an increasingly wider coverage to YouTube and Twitch's gaming content, as well as the personalities of 'influencers' active in those fields.

one for most. While this practice can be seen in relation to work, it happens – for me personally at least – more often as a leisure activity: saving links or videos of something that interests me and the consumption of which I expect to enjoy. Suffice to say, that despite various elaborate measures of storing and retrieving such bits and pieces, more often than not they remain safely 'saved' out there, without ever being consumed, until a cleaning streak or a browser crash releases me from their joyful burden and allows me to begin collecting new bits again. In the original reading of interpassivity, what I do when I save a page for future consumption is:

1. Relegating the storage of this information to the browser's memory, instead of mine.
2. Relegating the belief that I will one day retrieve it from the browser's memory to an external observer, who
 - a. Might be a real person, for instance a colleague to whom I say 'oh, I'll definitely read this after I'm done with grading!' or
 - b. An imagined entity, a 'someone else' who might believe in this future retrieval (1) even if I myself do not.

In the case of the second shift, it does not matter whether A or B, because interpassivity is as much about ritual and habit as it is about actual use. There is a perceived automatism in the action: acknowledgement of enjoyment that remains true even if we know the delegation to be false, as Pfaller exemplifies by pointing out that we still laugh when a 'dead' actor sneezes onstage, though we have known him all along to not be dead at all. In its broader view, the theory presupposes that every form of symbolic interactions engenders a form of interpassivity, since the pleasure of reading or spectating 'seems to be an interpassive one: it consists of creating and splitting off another character who serves as a backdrop for the illusions that one does not share but still finds great' (Pfaller 2017b: 45). Here, the intention is one of liberation: one can simultaneously maintain consumption of up-to-date culture while freeing oneself from the need to fully commit.² Returning to the case of spectating play (in-person or digitally) this realization illuminates this bizarre (at first sight) practice, which stands in opposition to gaming as an interactive medium. Watching someone else play a game does not require one to believe that this is equivalent in enjoyment to playing the game oneself, yet an *allocation of such belief to an imaginary naïve other is possible*. Specifically, the impressive numbers on various spectating platforms and the wide coverage by the gaming press³ of YouTube- and Twitch-related issues can act as such a naïve observer: I delegate my play to LPers, since I know that the act of watching others play is popular, because it is reported as popular, so I watch, even if deep down I do not believe it to be worthwhile my time.

However, another strand of interpassivity scholarship takes this argument further. Social philosopher Van Oenen (2008) re-examines the notion through a prism that grew predominantly prominent in media studies ever since: interpassivity as a choice of non-participation. To him, there is a crucial lack of historical contextualization in the works of Pfaller and Žižek, which ties interpassivity to the historicized notion of 'activity', as found in modernity. Interpassivity in this view is a conscious move away from taking action, often as a form of a cognitive defence mechanism against the growing demands on participation required by modern political institutions.

Similarly, in his call for a more informed critical media theory Taylor (2009) build on his empirical exploration of hacker and hacktivist groups to suggest that digital resistance is inherently a-political. To him, the paths of digital activity (or activism) are 'more accurately described in terms of interpassivity, whereby the reaction of an individual to a stimulus or particular process is, as previously encountered within notions of the culture industry, pre-encoded well in advance' (Taylor 2009: 101). While not acknowledging Van Oenen directly, he subscribes to this political interpretation rooted in modernity and modernity's entanglement of communication and control (Deleuze 1992; Galloway 2004, 2010). I have made similar observations in my previous work on Anonymous, arguing that participating in the collective's coordinated actions eschews technical knowledge but also political one (Gekker 2012). In this light, interpassivity can be understood as a limitation to freedom by way of illusion of choice. Many gamers would recognize this in the form of the 'rail-shooter' genre: you might have the perceived choice on what to shoot, but no control of the trajectory of your avatar or even which direction to face. Combined with the socio-technical affordances of current digital technologies (Berry 2014, 2011; Manovich 2013) and the ongoing commodification of attention as a scarce resource (boyd 2017; Grosser 2014; Terranova 2012), this view also positions most choices within digital interactive systems as interpassive to a degree. In other words, when such view is applied to contemporary media the default action can be seen as a *choice to relegate your choices to the system which you operate*.

Let us return for a moment to the example of the saved tabs. Rather than seeing it as relating to other cultural instances of enjoying vicariously, Van Oenen interprets it as a form of anxiety. It is rooted in the constant requirement on one's cognitive resources, constituting a self-imposed burden. In a similar venue, one can imagine watching others play videogames as a response to an analysis-paralysis manifested by the growing number of games and gaming-related activities that are aggressively marketed onto the players (Coleman and Dyer-Witheford 2007; Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009; Foxman and Nieborg 2016; Nieborg 2015, 2011). However, in the next section of this article I will offer somewhat different explanation, which hinges on Schölzel's (2017) interpretation of interpassivity as a form of resistance rather than compliance. This understanding incorporates Van Oenen's view, along several other common criticism of the narcotizing function of new media, before connecting it with Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and cybernetics.

To play everything, click here

Schölzel attempts to re-examine and redefine interpassivity by first zooming in on the notion of interactivity laying at its core. He understands it via ANT, as a circular activity connecting multiple actants into (quasi-cybernetic) loops of control. He argues that when all we have to do is 'do', the conscious 'not-doing' or maybe more precisely 'letting-something-else-do' of interpassivity offers a new form of resistance. Specifically, such prism allows to see interpassivity as a form of ongoing 'circular association' of things – human and non-human – pushing against each other to reach equilibrium. No static state is possible and each attempt to explain an ongoing cycle is grounded in a methodological agreement to 'take a snapshot' of an ongoing process (Akrich 1992; Akrich and Latour 1992; Latour 1996, 2005). For Schölzel, the

rise of such self-regulating algorithmic circles that possess the appearance (or appeal) of human-like communication positions society closer to Van Oenen's warning of 'ideological overload of participation by the discourse on interactivity that may produce such inconveniences' (Schölzel 2017: 198). Interactive subjects are bound to operate within the confines of the system that enable and enforce such interactivity, in a way reminiscent of Galloway's (2004) assertion that in protocological (read, digital interactive) systems, the mere act of participation is equivalent to adopting – at least to some extent – the ideology of such system. Similarly,

in the case of interactivity this process [self-regulation of society, AG] tends to limit the purpose of participation in a circular association to its own maintenance. Interactive participation becomes an end in itself for the subjects involved, and the concept leaves no margin for establishing sense or subject positions outside a self-creating circular association. (Schölzel 2017: 199)

One is defined by one's ability to participate in the process, not necessarily by what they bring to such process.

There is an interesting parallel in this framework to the political thought of accelerationism (Williams and Srnicek 2013; Srnicek and Williams 2015) and the call to accelerate capitalist modes of production and consumption to bring its inevitable end. In a 24-point manifesto, Williams and Srnicek embrace technological progress even as it is being produced and reproduced in neo-Liberal capitalist setting, to which they oppose. They too warn against the valorizing of participation over results and state that '[th]e overwhelming privileging of democracy-as-process needs to be left behind. The fetishisation of openness, horizontality, and inclusion of much of today's "radical" left set the stage for ineffectiveness' (Williams and Srnicek 2013: par. 13). A controversial stance with many detractors (Noys 2014) accelerationism nonetheless differs from the interpassive notion of resistance by introducing Pfaller's naïve observer and subsequent avoidance by the latter. Similar to the accelerationists, Schölzell recognizes the pervasive atmosphere of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher 2009), but unlike them he offers the notion of the detached interpassive non-participant as a potential prism to another mode of existence, rather than wilful replication and acceleration of the same domineering mode.

Let us examine how such resistant stance might manifest in the game *Idle Champions of the Forgotten Realms* (Codename Entertainment 2017, *Idle Champions* from hereon). Building on Fizek's (2018) notion of escaping the pressure and becoming the subject of play, without having to perform the act of playing, I examine how *Idle Champion* fairs as resistance to dominant game modes.

Idle games are a subset of clicker games (Ruffino 2016), or 'games that can progress without player interaction for some period of time. The majority of the play in idle games takes place in the background while waiting, thus idle games can be also identified as background games and ambient games' (Alharthi et al. 2018: 6). The genre started out as a joke or parody, but soon became popular, often despite the intentions of the game makers themselves. Designer and researcher Ian Bogost recalls his attempt at making a clicker game, which parodied the then-popular *Farmville* (Zynga 2013), which

became increasingly more popular and required him to dedicate a growing time an effort to its development:

On one level, this was all part of the act. Bogost was inhabiting the persona of a manipulative game designer, and therefore it made sense to pull every dirty trick he could to make the game as sticky and addictive as possible. But as he grew into the role, he got a genuine thrill from his creation's popularity. Instead of addressing a few hundred participants at a conference, he was sharing his perspective with tens of thousands of players, many of whom checked in several times a day. Furthermore, every time he made the game better, he received some positive bit of feedback – more players, a nice review, a funny comment on his Facebook page. Tweaking the game was almost like a game itself: Finish a task, receive a reward.

(Tanz 2011: n.pag.)

Idle Heroes was selected by going to SteamSpy, a website run by an external party based on Valve's Steam API. The service collects statistical information from various users and displays trends in video gaming's largest platform by looking at both owners and average active players (SteamSpy n.d.). I searched for the term [idle] on the website. The service returned a list of sixteen games, out of which *Idle Champions* had the highest number of owners and active users. I chose this game and played it over the course of several months to get a better understanding of the genre (albeit 'playing' is a problematic term as I will discuss next). Alharti et al. (2018) develop a classification of clicker and idle games based on the kinds of actions afforded by the game. In their taxonomy, *Idle Heroes* is a single-resource incremental game. Based on Wizards of the Coast's popular *Dungeons and Dragons* franchise, the game lets the player recruit a party of heroes and send them on a series of adventures. The heroes automatically attack enemies on-screen and collect gold that can be then used to recruit additional heroes or upgrade existing ones to cause more damage. The only other player action allowed is re-arranging the heroes in a grid formation, since some have abilities that work in combination with other heroes or at specific spots. The decision-making is not difficult, as the total damage output of the party is prominently displayed in the top-left corner of the screen and any changes in the formation are indicated in green or red (Figure 1). The counters in the game (for gold and damage) start low but can quickly run into the billions. The game continues to 'function' in the background whether one plays it or not. It maintains the illusion of doing so even when it does not run, as your party repeats the adventure endlessly while the game is closed. For instance, once logging-in after two months of inactivity I was greeted by a message telling me exactly how long I was away and how much gold my heroes have acquired (Figure 2). Re-arranging the formation and purchasing/upgrading heroes to maximize your damage and thus accruing more gold in between sessions is therefore the main game loop. Clicking the enemies deals small amount of damage, which becomes miniscule quickly without upgrading the clicks themselves. All adventures end with a boss fight but can then be immediately repeated with the same sequence of events and enemies, only upgraded numerically to fit your growing party's power.

There are many things that can be said about this particular mode of play. We can talk about the nature of waiting and the satisfaction of discovering wealth. We can muse on the nature of play and non-play. We can relate the



Figure 1: Game interface. In the top corner: total gold of party; total damage output of party.



Figure 2: Welcoming message announcing the time that passed since I last launched the game and the gold collected in the meantime.

game to other prevalent modes of background computing and conflate this type of play with such economic activities as high-frequency trading or bitcoin mining.⁴ In her analysis, Fizek also suggests such gameplay as possibly liberating (freeing scarce attention, repeating pleasure and removing drudgery) but also compulsive, reminiscent of the ways social media website draw their users in. My aim here is similar to her last point. To recall, I do not wish to analyse the game, but to use the 'Zizekian toolbox' to examine *through* the game the ideological make-up of society, centred around discourses on interactivity and interpassivity. Specifically, I claim that *Idle Heroes* is a limited form of interpassivity, despite all the waiting and the seeming relegation of classic RPG enjoyment (form party, kill monsters, gain treasure) to the underlying machine. Specifically, while managing to relegate the enjoyment of the video game to the machine, it reproduces the political economy of interactivity that sustains such games.

Idle Heroes is a testament to the kind of cybernetic interactivity Schölzel warns against. It offers the guise of ultimate control, by giving clear and undisputable indication to the correctness of each action the player performs. I have written elsewhere on the productive capacities of numerical elements in user interfaces to engender pleasure (Gekker 2016) continuing the line of inquiry into the neo-liberal managerial notions of worth and audit found in contemporary computer systems, intended for work as well as play (Beer 2015; Gerlitz and Helmond 2013; Grosser 2014; Rossiter 2015). This game follows suit, as it eliminates the epistemological uncertainty that characterizes many other games – your performance is rated immediately and failure carries very little punishment (Juul 2013; cf. Juul 2010). This is exactly the kind of interactivity that carries no consequences. The game can be seen almost as a parody of digital media: your clicks enact change on a minuscule scale of the immediate tactical formation, which then can be forgotten until the next time that one remembers to open it. You are rewarded for occasionally checking in and reaping the fruits of your actions. Those action matter little in themselves, but carry a symbolic value *en masse* since they indicate the elusive goal of 'engagement' lauded by various actors in the digital economy. Ultimately you might be persuaded to spend a few micro-transactions to speed up or otherwise enhance this experience, but even if you do not, your play has value since it indicates that attention is being paid to the game. In turn, this will ensure the continuous development of the game and its visibility to various stakeholders, potentially enticing the small percentage of paying players to stick around and make the game viable. To recall, this is reminiscent of the immaterial labour required by social media users (Grosser 2014) and also of the self-management dredge performed by labourers in quantified workplaces (Moore and Robinson 2016).

This leads us to examine the conditions of the so-called attention economy (Crogan and Kinsley 2012; Goldhaber 1997; Marwick 2015; Stiegler 2010; Terranova 2012; Tufekci 2013) under which contemporary video games industry operates. Consumption of media has become predicated on the belief in the same naïve others that Pfaller lauded as an escape from interactivity. Online ads are sold in bulk by the million on the vague promise of 'impressions' or 'engagement', often provided by the same companies that enable the infrastructures of such advertising. We know that the comment section is a swamp of toxicity yet nonetheless we go there. This has far-reaching consequences for various institutions in modern democracies, that have gotten used to equate interest with importance (boyd 2017). Games are symptomatic of

4. For a more in-depth analysis of these kinds of games' roles in player lives, see ongoing work on understanding casual, social and background games and this special issue (Hjorth and Richardson 2014; Juul 2010; Keogh and Richardson 2018; Pargman and Jakobsson 2008; Philips 2016).

this. Despite rising budgets of the high-calibre titles, veteran designer and writer Raph Koster suggests that overall costs per game byte fall, predominantly thanks to the rise of the Indy developers (Koster 2017, 2018). With many more games and saturating markets, the mere act of drawing players (who are, less and less *paying players*) has become difficult. Various free-to-play, bundle sales, promotions and discounts exacerbate the issue rather than alleviating it: current video game hobbyists can expect an ongoing deluge of new game content. Most games today are rarely completed by most players (Allford 2015), although the notion of 'finished' may be a misnomer in a culture of circular associations and endless feedback loops. One games writer suggested, echoing tongue-in-cheek the accelerationist logic, that with the rise of work automation and widening inequality, the only paying job of the future will be pro-gamer – only not in the way it is meant today. Rather, based on an interview with virtual worlds researcher Edward Castronova he suggests a future in which:

Automation will create huge masses of unemployed would-be factory workers. The superrich will number fewer and fewer and get richer and richer. Which means game companies will drift toward a virtual-world New Deal. They'll have to soak their whales more and more to stay in business, but keeping them happy will require making sure their worlds are vibrant communities. So the game companies need those low-spending, poorer folks to show up. Rich players don't want to play with bots; they crave the social fellowship of real humans. And they also enjoy the thrill of lording their socioeconomic status over others. (It's casino psychology again: 'The big shots want to walk into a crowded casino and go into the high rollers' room', Castronova says, 'walking past a guy like me playing craps').

(Thompson 2017)

Idle Heroes while constituting a form interpassivity can be seen as preparing the players to the hypothetical future above. It is a self-regulating system in which participation is meaningless yet encouraged and rewarded, following the tenants of the attention economy. However, in modern gaming landscape I recognize another type of activity that can allow us to 'bac[k] away from the circles of control' (Schölzel 2017: 187) more fully employing the kind of Schölzelian resistance outline above. These are the LPs of videogames found on YouTube.

Not play

Up until now in this article I have defined interpassivity, positioned it as a diagnostic tool in relation to the role of digital interfaces in the attention economy, and highlighted how idle games are not the interpassive remedy to the growing exhaustion from games and game-like things. In this final section I wish to offer an optimistic reading of the LP genre, seen through Schölzel's prism of interpassivity as resistance to cybernetic circles of meaningless participation.

Originating as a description of a video detailing a play-through of a game, the term has since come to denote longform, often episodic, take by an online entertainer, showcasing their own take on the game (Klepek 2015). Those can be entertaining, poignant, ridiculing or any other form and are predominantly reliant on the LPer's ability to entertain via the medium of the game. In their

early introduction to game spectatorship communities, Smith et al. (2013) group LPs along two other types of spectatorship practices (e-sports and speed runs) that are more skill-focussed. Their work also combines YouTube and the live-streaming real-time platform Twitch.Tv under the same analytical framework. However, I argue that such analysis is missing the point, since the two platforms⁵ mentioned above are radically different in their socio-technical configuration and thus must be understood separately. The one is built on real-time live transmission of a singular act of gameplay, while the other is encoded and uploaded after the fact of play and thus exists in a different temporal rhythm. Therefore, in my writing here it talk *specifically about LPs hosted on YouTube* and exclude live-streaming of games, be it on YouTube or Twitch.

Game researcher René Glas compares LPs to the experience of early cinema goers enjoying cinema of attraction, where movie lacked coherent narratives and instead offered the technologically innovative experience of new ways of seeing (think of the Lumieres' arrival of the train). In those early films, the cameraman would make himself known and exaggerate some of the reactions to the event occurring while filming, to signal the emotions that should be felt by the viewers. Glas calls it *vicarious play* and explains that '[f] or the viewer of an LP video, the LP creator becomes the homunculus in a form reminiscent of early film as discussed by McMahan. But rather than having the homunculus facilitate diegetic immersion through non-diegetic engagement, here it triggers what one could call ludic immersion through non-ludic engagement' (Glas 2015: 84). In other words, the LPer acts, if not as proxy, then at least as an emotional compass for the spectator. Another view on the role and function of these videos is provided by educator researchers Burwell and Miller (2016). They position LPs as paratextual practices, similar to cheat sites, forums and fan art that contribute to the growing 'gaming capital' (Consalvo 2007: 22) of video game players. Similar to how a film buff differs from a casual movie goer in their growing appreciation of information external to the film, such as interviews with the production crews or first draft scripts, so does the gamer use LPs as sites of meaning-making to develop additional cultural capital pertaining to specific utterances, practices and positions to the larger gaming milieu. Combined with Glas' notion of vicarious play this introduces an interesting claim into our interactivity discussion. If we assume games to be the dominant leisure form of computer culture, and interactivity/participation the chief organizational directive of such culture (Schäfer 2011; Zimmerman 2015), then the ability to step outside the interactivity of a game and reassess it via the agency of others (LPer and the community commenting on it over time) is a reminiscence of the interpassivity ideal.

Of course, this by no means abolishes LPs of responsibility for ongoing value extraction and their complicity in the attention economy. I am well aware that if attention is the new scarce resource (Terranova 2012), then the ability to make games to occupy the attention of people *even when they are not played* is indicative of the same power play that other digital platforms make for our cognitive resources (Berry 2014). Other problematic practices are the training of players to constant self-surveillance (Walker 2014) or the fact that YouTube's platform affordance causes LPers to internalize the business models and logics of said platform, often to their own detriment (Postigo 2016). After all, following his auto-ethnography as a LPer, media scholar Hector Postigo notes that

5. There are additional smaller players in the spectatorship business. Facebook and Activision Blizzard have recently launched a partnership that allows one to stream some games directly to their feed. Several competitive games allow spectatorship from within their respective interfaces. These all are outside the scope of this article, yet nonetheless reinforce my point: these are different platforms that require separate analyses.

YouTube (or any platforms that invite UGC for its inventory) is not unlike a bettor at a roulette table who is in the happy position of betting on all the numbers, where the payout in aggregate outweighs what appears to be an otherwise wild investment. Some numbers don't pay, others pay a little, and some pay a lot. Some content types may thrive and then fade into obscurity, some commentators may be successful and then burn out, and some videos may go viral and others remain unknown. In aggregate, however, no matter what the scenario, YouTube the bettor always wins.

(2016: 15)

It is, first and foremost, an advertising platform owned by one of largest corporations in the world, and in allowing for LP content to thrive it cares little neither for the content producers nor their audience, but rather for the aggregate consumption.

Still, I argue that LPs possess more emancipatory potential than even idle games when watched as interpassive practices. Exploitative and potentially damaging to the LPers themselves (Alexander 2018) they nonetheless offer audiences a glimpse into the protocological nature of software and the controls it enables. To illustrate, I will finish the article with the examination of a specific LP and highlight how the content and platform affordances allow for the effects I posit.

Aurora4x (Walmsley 2004) is not your usual game. A free-to-download one-man project developed by Steve Walmsley was initially a way for him to learn visual basic and later became a self-described 'game for me to play that I just happen to make available to others' (Smith 2013: n.pag.); it looks and plays as you would expect from a Visual Basic powered game: like a collection of spreadsheets (Figure 3). A space empire simulation game, heavy on role-playing elements via intricate customizations and the ability to add flavour text to many components, I was introduced to it via a LP series done by the LPer Quill18 (Martin Gaude) over the course of few weeks (Quill18n.d.) By



Figure 3: Screenshot of *Aurora4x*'s interface from Quill's LP. The video in question is Episode 11 of the series (quill18 2016a).

showcasing the various aspects of the game, he made me want to play it and so I did for a few days, alongside watching his videos.

I was not the only one, so it seems. Since the game is free and is only downloadable via the creator's personal website, it is difficult to gauge the effect the LP had on its popularity. However, judging by the statistics and comments in the sub-Reddit (discussion forum) dedicated to the game, many chose to experience the game alongside Quill18 in their journey of discovery (Figures 4 and 5) and lost interest when he did (Figures 4 and 6). The game is intentionally complex and not particularly intuitive in its UI.

Towards Episode 11, Quill18 realizes the daunting task ahead. He spent part of a previous session with an on-screen calculator, trying to work out how his missiles will work (in *Aurora4x*, you must research and configure individual components of the missile such as warhead mass and fuel capacity). Now, he comes prepared. At 30:15 he switches from the game into another screen, where he prepared in advance a spreadsheet to explain his future fleet's composition (Figure 7). In doing so, he exclaims with joyful irony exclaims '[h]ey, officially using spreadsheets! Wohoo!' (quill18 2016a: 30:17). He then proceeds to explain his reasoning and plans for the next episode for the remainder of the video, circa five minutes. He does that while still on the spreadsheet screen, narrating his actions through clicking on various cells. The video affordance of YouTube allows here to showcase the process of decision making, not limited to the software limitation of a single gaming interface.

The spreadsheets return in the next video (quill18 2016b), where Quill18 uses it to highlight the calculation choices he did in between the two episodes

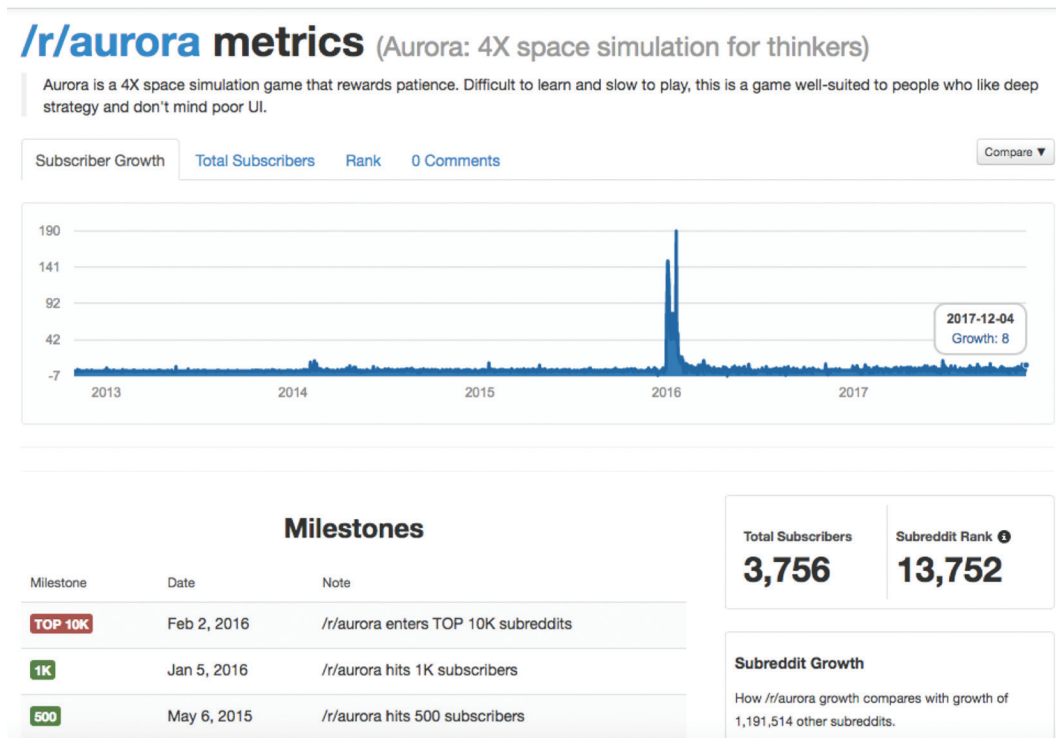


Figure 4: User activity in the Aurora4x sub-Reddit. Source: <http://redditmetrics.com/r/aurora>.

The screenshot shows a Reddit post titled "Wow, Quills let's play has really brought this sub to life." by user self.aurora, submitted 1 year ago. The post has 127 upvotes and is highlighted with a blue border. The post text reads: "How great is this! I've been subbed here for a couple of years and I have never seen it so active as it is now. I can only assume this is thanks to Quills series. [EDIT] I think this illustrates it nicely. <http://redditmetrics.com/r/aurora>". Below the post are 39 comments. The first comment is by CaptainJackWho, who says they bought 6 games during the Steam Winter Sale and thanks Quill for helping them figure out how the game works. Other comments mention being gifted the game and running it at high resolutions.

Figure 5: Users commenting on the LP and the interest it brought to the game.

The screenshot shows a Reddit post titled "What happened to aurora 4x?" by user self.quill18, submitted 1 year ago. The post has 9 upvotes and 4 comments. The first comment is by The-red-Dane, who speculates that Quill might be busy with other things and that the low view counts on his series could be the reason. The second comment is by VariantC, who suggests Quill might have lost interest or couldn't record more content due to demand.

Figure 6: Users commenting on the LP and the dwindling interest from Quill18.

by graphically representing various missile warheads configurations of the missiles (Figure 8). Throughout the LP, he also occasionally refers to other external sources for understanding the game – such as wikis and LPs by other people on YouTube – showcasing the LP as a paratextual practice (Burwell and Miller 2016); gets frustrated about his own lack of understanding or considers whether to exploit a certain mechanic, as a form of vicarious play (Glas 2015); and also (jokingly) discusses the ad revenue from the seemingly 'boring' game he chooses to play (Postigo 2016) – a notion echoed by many of the comments.

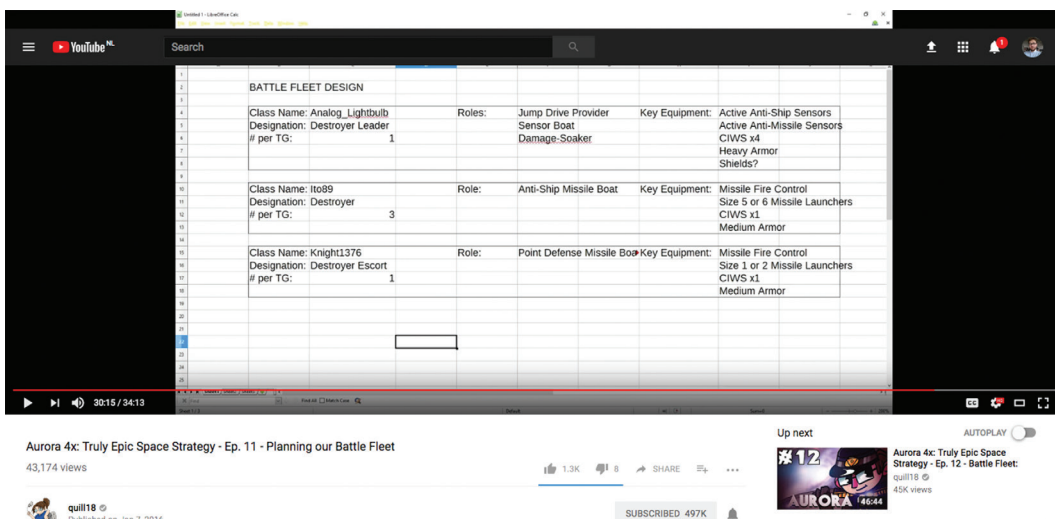


Figure 7: Quill18 showcases his future battle fleet, via the means of a spreadsheet.

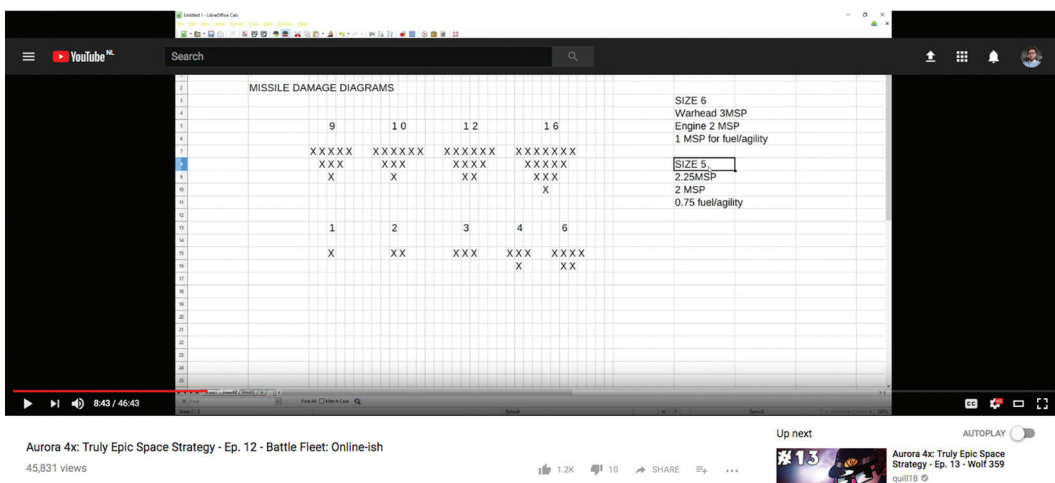


Figure 8: More spreadsheets in Quill18's next video.

For example the second most popular comment (with 109 upvotes) clearly refers to the entertainment value of the video in the attention economy:

Haha, I love the Quillite community. Quill has videos for a brand new, pretty looked forward to game with good visuals and combat and quite possibly a good story. What do we all want though. Ledger 4x Excel enhanced. LOL. All of the videos are great Quill!! Cannot wait for more. (comment on quill18 2016a, as of 2 July 2018)

Above all, these videos allow audiences the potential to remotely examine practices pertaining video games in an empathic yet detached setting, which is difficult to imagine in other media forms.

Conclusion: Backseat gaming

I began this article with a personal anecdote, in which I choose not to play a game out of sheer exhaustion but then find myself drawn to an LP of said game. I attempted to explain it by elucidating the two complementary meanings of interpassivity: Pfaller's original psychoanalytic take that imagines the relegation of pleasure as an ironic and subversive activity, and Van Oenen's diagnosis of societal discontent with the burden of participation. This led to using Schölzel amalgamation of those two views with Actor-Network Theory to imagine interpassivity as a potentially liberating practice within the attention economy, a way to step outside the interactive control loops that characterize many computerized (and political) systems today. The article then showcased how idle games, while interpassive, partially reproduce the conditions of the game industry, if not the gameplay itself. Specifically, they cement the anticipation of action and follow the templates of other interactive gaming practices reminding the player of the constant need to check, react and engage with the game. Finally, I highlighted how the detached observation of the LPs is more in-line with the proposed notion of resistance, through its affordance to bring para-textual aspects of gameplay by the use of other software (e.g. Excel) and considering the (financial) audience preferences throughout the game.

The term 'backseat gamer' denotes a person who comments on another person's playing experience, often in an annoying way. This is a controversial figure in gaming circles, derided yet also recognized for the truthful desire to get involved with others through the medium of videogames. With the rise of game spectatorship on platforms like YouTube and Twitch, the backseat gamer becomes far more entrenched in the cultural landscape than ever before. Perhaps through the adoption of the backseat gamer's traits – the detachment, criticism, mild annoyance and the desire to connect – modern gaming media consumers will be able to glance at the circles of ludic control around them, and step away.

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