

(un)real data ()real effects

Reader

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AKSIOMA



thomas spies the special laboratory of total refusal

The concept of flow, first recognised and named by the psychologist Mihaly Robert Csikszentmihalyi,¹ describes a highly focused state of mind conducive to productivity. A person, or player, in the context of video games, is “completely involved in an activity for its own sake”.² Seen by Csikszentmihalyi as an optimal experience, modern game companies try to stimulate a continuous state of flow through game design.

Given that a person in a state of flow not only ignores their own needs (such as food) but also loses track of time, self-awareness and the ability to distance themselves from the task at hand, they are, according to game designer Meghna Jayanth, receptive to the “possessive design”³ of a video game industry that is the largest entertainment complex in a late capitalist society. This is part of an attention economy that “robs us of agency, time, self-esteem, connection and fosters addiction, dependence, hatred, fear, insecurity and even social and interpersonal violence”. Jayanth further states that “under capitalism-colonialism, we do not have to intentionally design for these outcomes, but they are almost inevitable unless we deliberately and intentionally design against them”.⁴

If, according to Jayanth, critical game designers have to consciously “go against”, then this opposition is necessarily based on a dissolution of the player’s flow

- 1 Csikszentmihalyi, M. R. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper & Row.
- 2 Geirland, J. (1996, September 1). Go With the Flow. *Wired*. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from <https://www.wired.com/1996/09/czik>
- 3 Jayanth, M. (2021, November 30). *White Protagonism and Imperial Pleasures in Game Design*. Medium. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from <https://medium.com/@betterthetmask/white-protagonism-and-imperial-pleasures-in-game-design-digra21-a4bdb3f5583c>
- 4 Ibid.

state, as this is the only way to take a critical stance towards the inherent logics of video games as an entertainment medium. It is here, in a state of consciousness and at the deliberately and intentionally inflicted breaking point of what is perceived, not only by gamers, as conventional and taken-for-granted, that the work of Total Refusal can be located.

The self-described “Marxist media guerilla” Total Refusal is a collective founded in 2018 by Robin Klengel, Leonhard Müllner and Michael Stumpf. Named after the anti-establishment and anti-religious manifesto *Le Refus global*, released in 1948 by a group of young Quebec artists and intellectuals, the Viennese collective situates itself within a political tradition that rejects hegemonic socio-cultural and artistic norms and values. What also comes to mind is the *Great Refusal*, described by philosopher Herbert Marcuse as a radical practice involving cultural subversion that “is not so much a different road to socialism as an emergence of different goals and values, different aspirations in the men and women who resist and deny the massive exploitative power of corporate capitalism even in its most comfortable and liberal realizations”.⁵ For Marcuse, the Great Refusal recognises the mark of social repression within manifestations of traditional culture and in “the most spectacular manifestations of technical progress”.⁶

Mirroring the rapid evolution of hardware and software, video games are certainly a very spectacular manifestation of the technical progress of our time.

5 Marcuse, H. (1969). *An Essay on Liberation*. Beacon Press, p. 7. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/marcuse/works/1969/essay-liberation.pdf>
6 Ibid.

A mass medium that Total Refusal, echoing Marcuse, criticises for having tuned the rational and emotional faculties to align with its market and politics, steering them towards defending its dominion. To counter this, the collective hijacks mainstream video games, undermining the game mechanics and gameplay envisioned by the developers in order to expose their underlying ideologies. This can take place in the form of installations, films, published articles or live performances and lectures. Yet the drive to oppose video games as a medium stems from biographical proximity, as all members are active gamers themselves. Consequently, there is a great understanding of what the medium could potentially be, and a longing to show ways in which that potential can be realised. In Michael Stumpf's words:

“Simply put, we all spent a lot of time with the medium as gamers before working in the collective. Beyond that, however, the video game is the child and poster boy of late capitalism, reproducing its meritocratic narratives, patriarchal patterns and reactionary hero tropes to the same extent as the most conservative mainstream films. This is despite the fact that the video game, as an interactive medium, has the capacity to challenge our value system by confronting us with complex choices. For this reason alone, it makes sense to take an ideology-critical look at video games – all the more so because it is also a medium that represents a formative social space for so many people.”

Taking such a critical distance is at the heart of the V-effect of Bertold Brecht's writings on theatre, a concept very much suited to approaching the work of Total

Refusal and understanding the underlying ideas and ideals that the collective wants to convey. The V-effect contradicts the illusionary potentials of classical theatre by preventing the spectator from being completely immersed in the play – a form of “counter-play” that Total Refusal takes literally. This kind of disruption of the flow state does not necessarily make emotional involvement impossible, but redirects it from affective identification to an emotional as well as rational engagement with real-life relations and conditions. Brecht’s theatre cannot be fully regarded without connecting the V-effect to Karl Marx. Researcher Holger Pötzsch – who also links the theory of the V-effect to game studies – highlights the “dialectic dimensions of Brecht’s theatre that is directed at an estrangement (Verfremdung) of a state of Marxian alienation (Entfremdung) with the objective of unveiling naturalised, and therefore invisible, relations of exploitation and oppression [...]”⁷

Those fundamental contradictions of a class-divided society are revealed in Total Refusal’s highly praised short film *Hardly Working* (2022), which won several awards, including the European Short Film in 2023. Realised through video capturing in the detailed virtual world of *Red Dead Redemption 2* – a big-budget video game produced by Rockstar Games in 2018 – the setting, reminiscent of US society in the early 20th century, provided a perfect template for talking about the capitalist class system. Susanna Flock, who joined Total Refusal in 2020, explains:

7 Pötzsch, H. (2017). Playing Games with Shklovsky, Brecht, and Boal: Ostranenie, V-Effect, and Spect-Actors as Analytical Tools for Game Studies. *Game Studies*, 17(2). Retrieved June 18, 2024, from <https://gamestudies.org/1702/articles/potzsch>

“Workers toil in factories and sit in the mud outside their huts at night, while the bourgeoisie read newspapers and poetry in manicured gardens or go to the theatre. Hundreds of NPCs meticulously depict the same class relations that characterise both virtual and non-virtual capitalist cityscapes.”

The NPCs Susanna mentions, non-player characters that cannot be directly controlled by the player, have fixed behaviours that are defined by the game’s underlying programme code. In *Hardly Working*, we follow the never-changing, mundane routines of working-class NPCs through the game’s day-and-night cycle, becoming familiar with them and their Sisyphean tasks, such as sweeping a patio that will never be clean or hammering a constantly disappearing nail into the wood. The subversive shift from the conventionalised avatar-centric perspective to characters who are otherwise merely ornamental to the hyper-realistic game world, as much as they are obedient servants in the player’s heroic journey, is in many ways Brechtian: accompanied by a narrator’s commentary, the film’s class observations on a personal level are tied to Marxist theory, and “a specific form of estrangement becomes palpable that is closely linked to socio-economic relations and conditions, namely to a form of alienation of workers from the labour process, the objects of their labour, and therefore from themselves, each other, and the world”.⁸

The focus on NPCs comes with a great potential for identification – in our capitalist world, too, most people are forced to sell their time every day, doing repetitive work over which they have little say. At the same time, applying the

8 Ibid.

NPC-avatar analogy to real-world society should be carefully considered, as the term NPC has recently been utilised to bolster right-wing ideologies: used to dehumanise and ridicule opponents by suggesting that they lack independent thought and simply follow mainstream or progressive beliefs, it reinforces an “us versus them” mentality and at the same time promotes the neoliberal avatarian power fantasy of “you can be someone special if you just work hard enough”. Michael elaborates:

“If anything is more absurd than the endless loops of NPCs, it is the idea of the avatar standing at the centre of a world created solely for domination. But the same idea is conveyed to us by politics and economics that support class society – and by media that give the stage to elites whose actions are nothing but harmful and whose ‘success’ is ultimately only possible through the work of others. This diverts the focus from the institutional changes that would actually be in the interest of the common good.”

The glitch comes into play as a virtual analogy for a possible renunciation of the all-consuming loop of labour on a structural level. Referring to a temporary malfunction or irregularity in a technical system, often triggered by unexpected and transient faults, it is a phenomenon that regularly occurs in video games and causes them to stop working as intended. Leonhard Müllner attributes the reason for the recent cumulation of in-game glitches to the conditions of production and distribution of digital assets:

“Due to a deadline-driven, publisher-dominated game industry, most game releases in recent years

have been a disaster, or at least a debacle, in terms of the flaws in prematurely released titles. This system failure is an obvious symptom of an ailing late-capitalist distribution logic, where million-dollar games are dumped on the market in tatters because the market can’t seem to wait for that particular title to land on Steam [a distribution platform] on Black Friday or Saint Patrick’s Day and so on. As a result, the games hover in their imperfect state in which the algorithms conspire against their publishers by producing glitches.”

Leonhard speaks of algorithms as having a life of their own, and indeed for Robin Klengel, referring to his observations for *Hardly Working*, NPCs become sentient while glitching:

“They become more human through their mistakes and interruptions than is inherent in their algorithmic routines. It is precisely the fallibility, faltering, pausing, erring that is human.”

Of course, this must be seen as allegorical – the NPCs, and therefore the machine, do not come to life or, to stretch the allegory even further, become soulful. Leonhard comments:

“As far as I know, no one has a soul, at least no one knows exactly what that is. But as a metaphor, this esoteric term might work well. Machines, however, do not possess a soul; someone has to press ‘play’, but then they can develop a life of their own if you let them. To stay with the metaphor, I would speak of a ghost haunting the games, engaging in autonomous, sometimes joyful glitching and aesthetically interesting mischief. This ghost distorts, perforates

and surrealistically rearranges the representations of NPCs and landscapes in the hyperreal virtual worlds."

There lies agency in the glitch. As a dissident phenomenon, it rises above the system that produced it, representing a loss of control by that system. Part of machinic anxiety, the glitch is an indicator of something having gone wrong,⁹ which can also be interpreted in a social sense, as it occurs when there is an absence of (expected) functionality:¹⁰ a glitch induces the fear that a hitherto unquestioned (political) system might no longer be successful, and it is equally a sign that this fear is justified.

In Total Refusal's installation *Club Stahlbad* (2023), dancers experience glitching as an ecstatic moment of systemic (out)break. The name of the installation refers to a quote by Theodor Adorno: "*Fun ist ein Stahlbad. Die Vergnügungsindustrie verordnet es unablässig*",¹¹ which has been translated as "Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe".¹² The translation dilutes the fact that for Adorno, there is no healing in the "steel bath" that is leisure under capitalism: with its strict routines and rituals and dominated by consumerism, it serves only the reproduction of labour power. Even seemingly "fun" things like music and dance that appear to be liberating can, therefore, be interpreted as a

- 9 Russell, L. (2020). *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. Verso, p. 7
- 10 Menkman, R. (2011). *The Glitch Moment(um)*. Network Notebooks, p. 9.
- 11 Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (2006). *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*. Fischer, p. 149.
- 12 Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford University Press, p. 112.

commodity and "a sadistic cultural mandate to enjoy"¹³ – a thesis that is the origin of Total Refusal's *Club Stahlbad*.

To examine the mechanical rhythms and sequences in the aesthetics of club culture, the collective utilised the hyper-capitalist world of *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED 2020) with its multitude of nightclubs. Adrain Haim, who co-directed *Club Stahlbad*, explains that mods, additional software tools developed by the game community, provided access to the entire NPC database and control over their pre-programmed dance moves:

"By 'spamming' the buttons in the animation register, we were eventually able to create glitches that broke with the machine-like routine of the dances. Alongside with the resulting visual dance madness, we composed music together, but also alienated and tinkered with dance hits such as 'Can't Get You Out of My Head' by Kylie Minogue through heavy editing. In the contrast between a commodified, quasi-totalitarian fun culture and the liberating blow of breaking its aesthetics through audiovisual glitches, the political element of the work is expressed."

The NPC bodies escape monotony, repetition and repression in pleasure as they dissolve into the glitch and assert autonomy. Breaking out of standardised, socially acceptable and sterile forms of activity, they become abstract, unreadable, even indecipherable within a gender-binary

- 13 Weitzman, E. (2018). No "Fun": Aporias of Pleasure in Adorno's "Aesthetic Theory". *The German Quarterly*, 81(2), p. 186. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27676164>

assignment: non-performance as a “vehicle of refusal”¹⁴ and a critique of fun as the fake enjoyment of normativity.

In Total Refusal's multi-channel installation *BPM* presented at *Aksioma / Project Space* in Ljubljana, the deliberately provoked glitch of *Club Stahlbad* is merged with the inherently systemic glitch of *Hardly Working*. Robin notes that a video installation format, situated between film and art, grew organically out of the needs of the work, as well as the decision – and sometimes the economic necessity – to present larger projects like films as works-in-progress. *BPM* is a juxtaposition of the partially fragmented cinematic essay *Hardly Working* and the segmented *Club Stahlbad*. This fusion within a single installation space highlights the struggle of algorithmic entities as a multi-dimensional endeavour, questioning the rhythmicality and loop-ness of life under capitalism. It makes clear that, following Marcuse, cultural subversion involves a radical political practice to force change.

Both Brecht's politically conscientious and activist form of theatre, as well as the art of Total Refusal, seek to instigate change through critical insights and dissemination of knowledge, aiming their practices at the transformative and emancipatory potential in engaging with audiences. Following the reflections of philosopher Ernst Bloch on Brecht's theatre, the displacements of Total Refusal are less instruments of detection than of demonstration, “a special laboratory, where the possibilities of right behaviour can be dramatically and politically tested”.¹⁵ The collective comes closest to this experimental, audience-oriented approach in their public performances

14 Russell, 2020, p. 8.

15 Bloch, E. (1970). *Entfremdung, Verfremdung: Alienation, Estrangement. The Drama Review: TDR*, 15(1), p. 124.

and in-game lectures, where they enter virtual worlds displayed on a large screen in real time, traversing and commenting on them from a politicised perspective.

One such performance was *Brexit Reality*, the virtual book launch of art historian Valentina Tanni's latest publication *Exit Reality*. For the occasion, Valentina joined Total Refusal at the Slovenska kinoteka in Ljubljana for a city tour through a dystopian version of London under surveillance capitalism, as depicted in the video game *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft Toronto 2020). As Total Refusal visits different locations with their avatars in-game, Valentina points out how internet aesthetics, a socio-cultural phenomenon she discusses in her book, are heavily influenced by video games both in terms of imagery and language: over the past 15 years, multiple internet trends have incorporated game references or been designed to look like they originate from a video game. But the special laboratory of Total Refusal contains more than lecturing. When Leonhard Müllner drives one of London's red double-decker buses and keeps crashing into street lamps and pedestrians or when he stops on a small island in a city park that was in no way built for cars, let alone buses, to watch a jogger do some stretching, the resulting chaos is not only cathartic but also surprisingly reflective of the rules, norms and habits that structure our society.

For the audience, it is also, to recall Adorno, great fun to watch this “collapse of aesthetic distance, the total integration of the spectacle and life”,¹⁶ in which the term “fun” acquires a different meaning: it is no longer the socially mandated and mass-psychologically conditioned pseudo-pleasure of the culture industry,

16 Weitzman, 2018, p. 193.

manifested in the often banal, repetitive and apolitical goals and mechanics of mainstream video games like *Watch Dogs: Legion*. Instead, it becomes a “real pleasure”,¹⁷ which puts such goals and mechanics under suspicion. For Leonhard, this is a gateway to smuggling a radical message into public consciousness through pop culture:

“Humour is the lingua franca that can be used to reach all people equally, except the humourless. From the very beginning, we decided that our work should be predominantly and generally joyful, that it should also have a certain self-distance and looseness so that the agitation flows all the more smoothly when enjoying our work. We notice that a frostiness is spreading in art as the icebox of the distinctive young cultural bourgeoisie, which tends to avoid melting humour due to millennialised exposure paranoia. Also because this would allow a certain accessibility that would disrupt the pursued creation of distinction. In some cases, when humour does appear in ‘art spaces’, it is more like an inside joke that is nodded and smiled at with prior knowledge. However, we hope to use humour to inspire and radicalise gamers as well as the cultural bourgeoisie and non-media audiences in general.”

Brecht had a similar hope with his epic theatre, which, according to Walter Benjamin, is lavish only in occasions for laughter, as laughter is the best trigger for thinking.¹⁸

17 Ibid.

18 Benjamin, W. (1998). The author as producer. In *Understanding Brecht* (pp. 85–104). Verso, p. 101.

Like Brecht’s, Total Refusal’s humour is a tool of rebellion, “demasking the deeds of the serious ones who govern the whole”:¹⁹ always on the side of the oppressed, it revolts against the Sisyphean tasks of capitalism and against the capitalist system itself. Marcuse describes this kind of humour as oppositional: “In the face of the gruesomely serious totality of institutionalised politics, satire, irony and laughing provocation become a necessary dimension of the new politics.”²⁰

It is not an “imperial pleasure”²¹ that is the art of Total Refusal but a transformative one, exploring the subversive and emancipatory potential of the biggest mass medium of our time. Not only should we see ourselves in the struggles of NPCs, but we should learn from them, in the words of Michael Stumpf, how “to not function, to glitch, to bring the game to a halt”. As part of a counterculture that resists hegemonic narratives, Total Refusal’s Brechtian V-effect is a collective effort of group consciousness as described by Mark Fisher:²² it creates a consciousness of the cultural, political and existential machineries which produce subjugation, but also a consciousness of the potency of the subjugated group. In their special laboratory, while glitching the dichotomy between the virtual world and the world “away from keyboard”, Total Refusal deletes the ground texture

19 Marcuse, 1969, p. 46.

20 Ibid.

21 Jayanth, M. (2021, November 30). *White Protagonism and Imperial Pleasures in Game Design*. Medium. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from <https://medium.com/@betterthemask/white-protagonism-and-imperial-pleasures-in-game-design-diga21-a4bdb3f5583c>

22 Fisher, M. (2017, January 20). *No Romance Without Finance*. Plan C. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from <https://www.weareplan.org/blog/mark-fisher-no-romance-without-finance/>



Thomas Spies

beneath our feet, but also switches off gravity and elevates us, well protected by a funny-looking space suit, into the anti-flow.

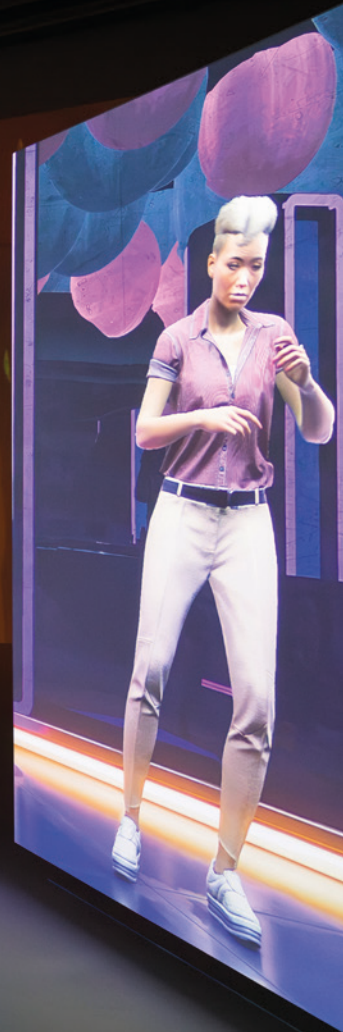
**total refusal
BPM**



















pp. 144–159:

Total Refusal, *BPM*, 2024

Multi-channel video installation.

Five synchronised projections, four vertical floating projection screens,
one horizontal background screen. Synchronised directional sound.

Dimensions variable.

Aksioma | Project Space, Ljubljana, Slovenia

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 Domen Pal/Aksioma



