

WORK HARD, PLAY HARDER

According to Tiziana Terranova, digital economy is a configuration composed of the postmodern cultural economy and the information industry (2000, p.35). It is characterised by the rising importance of personal data, the information related to data subjects or identified or identifiable individuals (OECD, 2013). Personal data is often accumulated on platforms where users interact. But are there any platforms whose value is rising because of the specific services they provide, the nature of engagement they foster, or the specific data they harvest? According to Thales Teixeira (2014, p.20), in the last two decades the *price* of high quality attention soared approximately nine-fold, whereas the *quality* of available consumer attention diminished.

I argue these developments present good enough reasons for marketers to fund companies that enable them to gather personal data in more engaging, as well as covert ways. With this research aim in mind, my main question is:

how can Amazon`s 2014 acquisition of Twitch be explained through the lens of spectatorial labour?

The framework through which I began analysing the importance of attention in the digital economy, and especially digital games, was the theory of spectatorial labour (or better said, spectatorial work or unpaid labour) by Jonathan Beller, developed in his *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of Spectacle* (2006).

SPECTATORIAL (FREE) LABOUR

Beller (2006) proposes that it began with the cinema and continued with television, video, internet and computers that new media now constitute deterritorialised factories in which spectators work (ibid., p.1). His hypothesis of the attention theory of value or the productive value of human attention derives from the idea that to look is to labour, and from theorising how the processes ran by capital occupy human time in the cinema

and other media (ibid., p.201). That forms the basis of a spectatorial economy that involves spectators and spectatorial labour directly in the production process (ibid.).

In *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, Maurizio Lazzarato (2014, p.37) considers the exercise of power and control by *private* enterprise that complemented *pastoral* and *State* power and control. In his view, this process began in the 1920s with the rise of advertising and the advent of television. Another scholar studying attention, Tim Wu, traces the lineage of attention merchants to the 19th century New York and the establishment of the first newspapers reliant on advertising, and to the flourishing of commercial art in the streets of Paris. Attention, however, was not intensively transformed into revenue until the beginning of the 20th century and the exploitation of mass attention by the British war propagandists. In his analysis, the radio was the first medium that became commercially viable due to its resale of the attention captured and exchanged for “free” content (Wu, 2016, p.13).

Beller (2006, p.231) notes that value connected to visual technologies is produced in the informal economy, by viewers who work on their sensoriums. Such *tooling of the body* that requires human labour time makes the body receptive to commodity flow and is therefore an instance giving value to capital (ibid., p.231). Where and how does this tooling happen? Where interaction, affection and immersion abound: in *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, Bernard Stiegler (2010, p.38) theorised about the processes and the effects of capturing public attention through service industries, cultural industries, as well as various programs that mesh the activities of individuals into behaviours motivated by business strategies. Beller perceives cinema and other cinematic technologies that followed its development as “the circulation of capital in and as consciousness” (2006, p.56). The regulation of consciousness via cinematic means is done in favour of industrial development (ibid., p.118).

One of the first books analysing the importance of affects and emotions for capitalism was *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* by Arlie Russell Hochschild. Published in 1983 and focusing solely on the workers and not consumers, it is the book that introduced the idea of emotional labour and connected it to jobs that required the worker to produce emotional states in others, whilst allowing the employer to exercise control over the employees` emotional activities (Hochschild, 2012, p.147). In the realm of paid work, individuals` capacities for warmth and empathy

are used for the benefit of corporations, and “worked-up warmth becomes an instrument of service work” (ibid., p.89).

Stiegler writes that service industries “no longer sell anything to a population that thus no longer needs to pay anything”, as people “give themselves” to service industries that “capture them as `available brain time`” (Stiegler, 2010, p.38). The process of providing a (online) service is, again, a way of capturing people`s attention. When the service is transferred to the digital realm, it is not solely the emotions of emotional labourers that are being commodified – and exploited. The attention, emotions and affects of *users* of services who “pay” solely for devices, electricity and internet connection, in some cases subscriptions, are being harvested and sold as personal data.

The programs synchronizing individuals’ activities into mass behaviours motivated by business plans are even more effective in the era of digital automation, when content can be personalised and targeted. In the neoliberal world ran by financial derivatives and big data, writes Luciana Parisi (2015, pp.127-128), gathering data, quantifying behaviours, beliefs and attitudes enable judging human actions, as well as directing and inciting preferred actions.

Not all human behaviours and actions hold the same value: the spaces where people play, or “the ludic realm”, provide an illusion of control, which makes gaming an exceptionally efficient psychic means of stimulating desire and controlling its development along a predetermined track (Ruti, 2012, in Webley and Cham, 2016, p.200). Desire is what advertisers and other manipulators of spectators play with.

DIGITAL GAMES AS IDEAL COMMODITIES

Considering the value of human attention, are not digital games the most efficient, or immersive, medium for value production? Kline and others consider interactive games the ideal commodities of post-Fordist information capitalism, as the business of interactive gaming exemplifies “the increasingly intense advertising, promotional, and surveillance strategies practised by post-Fordist marketers in an era of niche markets” (Kline, et.al., 2003, p.75). Moreover, Kline and others (ibid., p.201) recognise the value

of games and gamified systems as spaces that develop ideological functioning, or similarly as we named it earlier, build consciousness.

An interesting division of labour and a good example of ideological functioning is the case of the so-called online gold farmers and their *counter-players* from the United States and European countries. The gold farmers predominately come from China, because of the number of active World of Warcraft players in China surpasses the number of both European and US-based gamers of that game. They spend 12 hours a day and 7 days a week playing MMOGs (massive multiplayer online role-playing games) and are monetarily compensated for their play, which is predominately focused on the less-interesting side of gaming (Dibbell, 2016).

The virtual gold they farm is then sold to an online retailer who then sells it to European or US-based players who pay in order not concern themselves with this more or less boring part of gaming. The majority of players, however, does not receive compensation for their gold farming. Moreover, the merchants of virtual gold can make a proper living from the money received by being the mediators, selling virtual money (Dibbell, 2016). Apart from geopolitical questions, that leads to inquiries about the nature of unwaged work, free labour, or *playful* sweatshops in China. The case of Twitch, however, is even more explanatory.

Case: Twitch.tv

The website of US Securities and Exchange Commission (2014), specifically the document containing Amazon`s explanation of their acquisition of Twitch Interactive, Inc., is an interesting explanation of the value of this rising platform:

“On September 25, 2014, we acquired Twitch Interactive, Inc. (“Twitch”) for approximately \$842 million in cash, as adjusted for the assumption of options and other items. /.../ We acquired Twitch because of its community and the live streaming experience it provides. The primary reasons for our other 2014 acquisitions were to acquire technologies and know-how to enable Amazon to serve customers more effectively.”

Gaming, or e-sports, is expanding its viewership base, which has consequences for the venture capital activity. Following Putz and Mirhaydari (2018), in 2017 alone, more than \$700 million was invested in e-sports, whereas the capital invested so far

in 2018 almost reached last year’s numbers. However, in an economy ruled by a few platforms, we need to remember the remark of Tiziana Terranova that it is only a small number of sites that acquire venture capital investment (2000, p. 42).

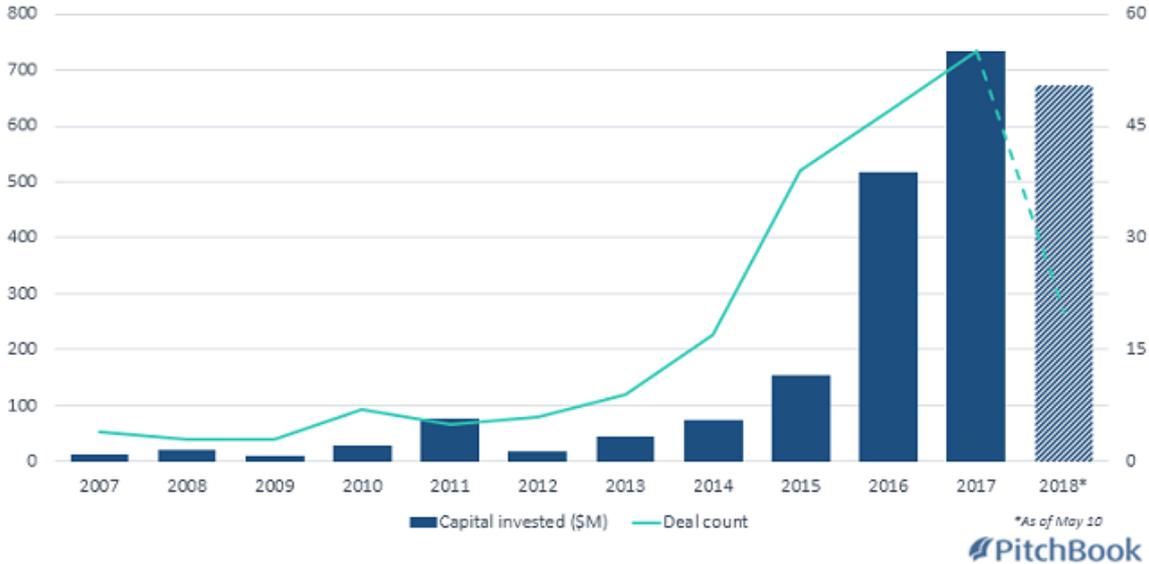
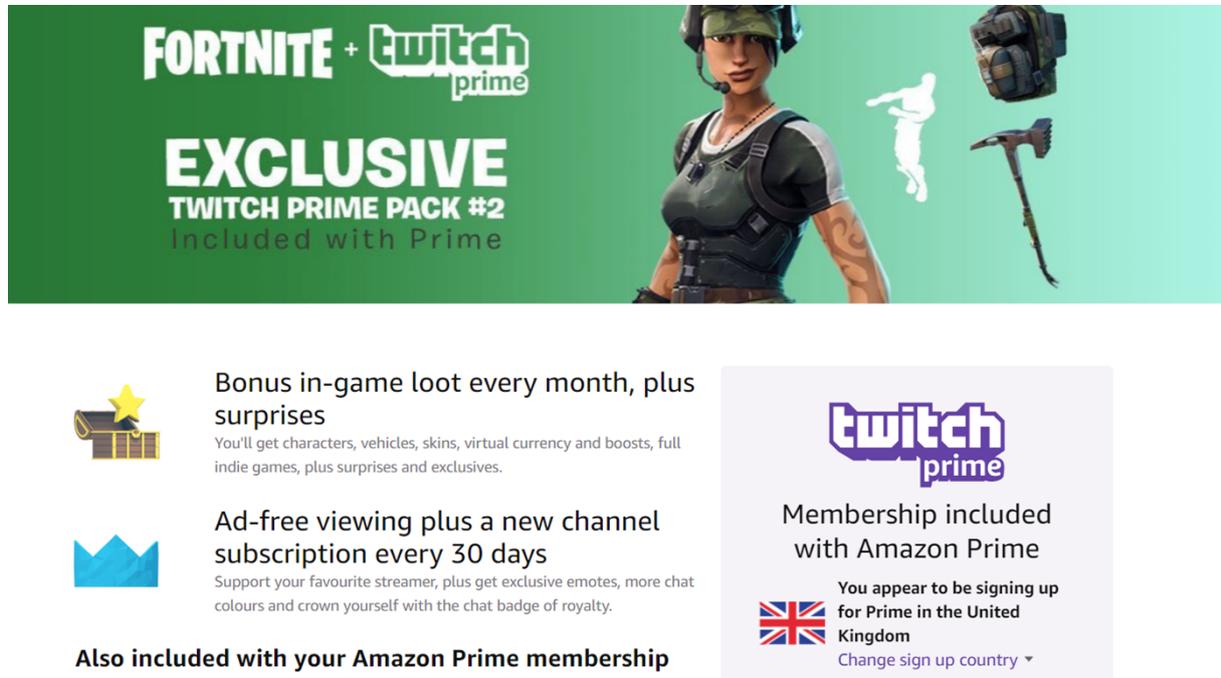


Figure 1: The rise in venture capital investment in e-sports. Source: Putz and Mirhaydari (2018)

The value of Twitch rises with its viewers. The number of people watching increased 21% since the 4th quarter of 2017, and at any moment there is roughly a million people watching a stream. In one session of the most popular game on the platform, Fortnite Battle Royale, when musician Drake joined the stream, one of the celebrity-gamers Tyler “Ninja” Blevins hosted 628 thousand synchronous viewers (Putz and Mirhaydari, 2018).

Taylor Clark (2017) researched the people who live from Twitch as gamers or talent managers. His fieldwork illuminated that in order to start getting paid, game streamers need to play, or work, almost constantly, and more than 8 hours daily, in order to build a fanbase and be enabled for a compensation. Previous interviews with streamers from Johnson and Woodcock (2017) clarified that streaming is a time-consuming career (often much more than 35 working hours a week) that necessitates reliability and regularity of broadcasts. They interviewed the streamers whose popularity enables them to offer spectators the option to subscribe, gain income through financial micro-transactions, merchandising deals, or tips and donations (Johnson and Woodcock,

2017, p.4). Besides streaming, their work is composed of networking and maintaining contacts, social media presence, decisions on what game to play, as well as technical and content preparation for the stream (ibid., p.9).



The advertisement is divided into several sections. At the top, it features the 'FORTNITE + twitch prime' logo on a green background. Below this, the text reads 'EXCLUSIVE TWITCH PRIME PACK #2 Included with Prime'. To the right, there is an image of a Fortnite character in a green and black outfit, a white silhouette of a character, and a pickaxe. Below the main text, there are three distinct benefit sections. The first section, titled 'Bonus in-game loot every month, plus surprises', includes an icon of a treasure chest and a star, and states that users will receive characters, vehicles, skins, virtual currency, and boosts. The second section, titled 'Ad-free viewing plus a new channel subscription every 30 days', includes an icon of a crown and states that users can support their favorite streamer with exclusive emotes and chat colors. The third section, titled 'Membership included with Amazon Prime', features the Twitch Prime logo and a sign-up interface for the United Kingdom, showing a UK flag and a 'Change sign up country' dropdown menu.

Figure 2: Advertisement for the Twitch Prime membership. Source: Twitch.

The image above reveals that subscribing for a Twitch Prime account includes an ad-free experience. Can we recognise a change in the advertising model? Twitch offers a good solution to product placement that was even years ago limited to embedding brand or product logos into gaming sphere backgrounds. As in the gaming industry, deals were (and still are) struck between game designers and marketers (Kline, et.al., 2003, p.235), nowadays promotional activity on Twitch is being also offered to gamers, as part of their salary comes from promoting products to viewers during the stream (Clark, 2017). One of the reasons of the value of Twitch for sponsors lies in its viewership demographic. Twitch is popular among Millennials who are said to resist traditional media based on advertising. Nevertheless, they listen to gamers-influencers-promoters for hours (Clark, 2017).

VALUE OF DESIRE

In the era of the overabundance of information and interactive platforms of various sorts, “it has become clear that affectively binding consumers through their own passions and enthusiasms sells more goods” (Thrift, 2006, p.286), so the value of emotional engagement for the economy increases. That is also connected to the shifts in the production process, as consumption and production are increasingly interlinked.

Lazzarato (2014, pp.18–19) criticises the theories of cognitive and cultural capitalism, as well as information society theories, for their exclusion of processes by which creation and innovation arise in the first place. According to Lazzarato, knowledge, information and cultural production depend on desire, which makes desire more central to the economy than knowledge. In his view, the theories of cognitive capitalism cede excessively to economic sciences that considers *knowledge* the driver of the economy.

In post-Fordism, writes Alexander R. Galloway, desire and identity are “part of the core economic base and thus woven into the value chain more than ever before” (2012, p.120). Writing about the technocapitalist phase of real subsumption, Luciana Parisi considers the logic of digital automation and its relation to cognitive *and* affective capital. Digital automation infiltrated »the spheres of affects and feelings, linguistic competencies, modes of cooperation, forms of knowledge, as well as manifestations of desire” (2015, p.127).

These manifestations of desire can be increasingly quantified, as the development of eye-tracking technologies and neuromarketing in general indicate. Emotional engagement is of the utmost importance for brand engagement, and that is why the value of users` identification with influencers, as well as immersion in technologies that enable flow are so important for the platforms that are worthy of the attention of venture capitalists. However, it is not solely investors who recognise the value of invasive personal surveillance. Recently, Raquel Breejon Robinson, a passionate gamer herself, developed a tool named All the Feels. The tool focuses on capturing the players` response to the game and it was developed as an overlay for Twitch. The first purpose of the tool is enhancing the experience of the spectator, and the second purpose is improving the connection between the spectator and the game streamer (Robinson, 2018).

In *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, Franco “Bifo” Berardi (2009, p.9-13) defines soul as the affinities between people, as well as webs of tastes and attachments. The soul and its desire were colonised - they entered the production process and labour-power was transformed into human capital, or as Galloway (2012, p.120) names it, the “human interface”. It is valuable for the economy predominately as the site for value extraction, of monetising eyeballs and programming behaviours.

INFORMATION AND IMAGINATION

In 1993, Charlie Magee published *The Age of Imagination: Coming Soon to a Civilization Near You*. He wrote about a transition from the information age to the imagination age, referring to the tools controlling the products of each respective age:

“So, as the tools of the agricultural age control the products of the hunter-gatherer age, and the industrial tools control the products of the agricultural age, and the information tools control the products of the industrial age, what will control the information tools? The human Imagination. The human Spirit. The ineffable Mind.” (Magee, 1993, p. 96)

He writes that our task is to develop *our* imaginations.

The entry about the imagination age on Wikipedia considers it “a theoretical period beyond the information age where creativity and imagination will become the primary creators of economic value”, resulting from the influence of virtual reality, user-generated content and imaginative work that will be needed in the transition from a text-based to 3D internet. Wikipedia aside, recent literature such as the book that Thomas L. Friedman called his favourite business book, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* by Daniel H. Pink (2011), praises the value of creativity in contrast to logic and analytical thinking. He names design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning the six skills that (will) lead to success in the current era (ibid., p.2). If in the economy of “stuff,” engineering and economics were dominating, in attention economy, writes Lanham (2006, p.xii), that position reverses and the “arts and letters” take their place.

Perhaps the rising value of gaming streaming industry is one of the indicators that we have entered the Imagination Age, where rationality and analysis have become

less important? If we return to Jonathan Beller and his theory of spectatorial labour, by theorising the productive value of human attention he focuses his critique on “the robbery of the spectator’s vision in particular, and of his or her sensuality, perceptivity, activity, and consciousness” (Beller, 2006, p.177). This echoes Yann Moulier Boutang’s claims about the three scarce resources in cognitive capitalism: time, cognitive attention and care or affective attention (2011, p.72). As the author of the theory of flow, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, writes (2008, p. 31), attention is what enables us to determine the relevant information when it is abundant. Besides that, it is attention that allows us to recover relevant memories, evaluate events and decide on the right thing to do.

Pink (2011, p.69) writes that the biggest change of the Conceptual age, as he calls it, is not in the work-realm, but “might be occurring outside the office-and inside our hearts and souls.” Perhaps it is not as positive of a change that a business book proposes. The value of attention might be rising in another way as well - as in the era when attention is scarce, being imaginative becomes more troublesome. In the words of Csikszentmihalyi, it is sensible to think of attention as “*psychic energy*” (2008, p.33) – and where does imagination, where does art spring from, if not from the soul, our psychic energy? In the era of digital devices and connectivity, we are constantly being interrupted - with ever-more personalised calls to action, which disable the flourishing of creativity and imagination.

If we listen to Bernard Stiegler (2010, p.15): “Fantasy, created through *phantasia* (i.e., through the imagination’s formation of symbolic mediations), is humanity’s most precious gift”. Warning about the programming industries’ ways of destroying the possibilities of attention-formation in children, he adds:

“uncontrolled cultural industrialization activates the psychopower of attentional control, which then constrains fantasy (having become “entertainment” to the role of capturing its audience through the most archaic drives, then compelling it to construct a consciousness reduced to simple, reflex cerebral functions, which is always disenchanting and always “available.” (ibid.)

The creator of Pokemon, Satoshi Tajiri, wrote that his inspiration for the legendary game came from his playing with, or catching, live insects (Larimer, 1999), playing in nature. The creativity of future adults who were children in the year 2010, when “the

combined daily time of attention capture in the United States has reached an *average* of eight and one-half hours per day, including school days” (Stiegler, 2010, p.94), will be probably very different than the creativity of children from the past, and even more different from creativity of future adults whose time spend with immersive media is even increasing.

In *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, Franklin Foer (2017,p.22) warns that the big attention-grabbing platforms have created

“a world in which we are constantly watched and always distracted. Through their accumulation of data, they have constructed a portrait of our minds, which they use to invisibly guide mass behaviour (and increasingly individual behaviour) to further their financial interests.”

In his view, the big tech companies, Amazon being one of them, are shattering the possibility for contemplation, as their most valuable asset is also ours: attention (ibid.). Most importantly for our analysis, optimal flow or attention is what enables creativity, and attention is being destroyed for the purposes of businesses. Gaming as much as possible is made easier by game design, as retention is often necessitated for success in the game. Even better if gaming, or play, transforms into work that brings money.

What about addiction? Interestingly, none of the respondents in the study by Johnson and Woodcock (2017) mentioned it, and being addicted to gaming – or in this case, work - was not questioned by researchers themselves. In *Addiction By Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*, Natacha Dow Schüll (2012) interviewed game designers and gamers or gamblers in Las Vegas. Her landmark study of the design of immersive game experiences is applicable to the realm of digitally-mediated interaction, and especially digital games. She writes (2012, pp.53-58) that the industry objective is to produce value from voluntary play acts, and to extend time-on-device, to produce even more value. Game design encourages longer, faster and ever more intensive play, and the gamer`s leap into the so-called *zone experience*.

Twitch streamers interviewed by Johnson and Woodcock (2017, p.8) all emphasised the role of passion in their work ethic. We can consider the role of passion in relation to working *in* or *with* the flow. In the case of gaming, however, it is important to consider their addictive aspects. The flow experience, as theorised by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008, p.40) happens when one`s psychic energy or attention “has been invested

successfully in goals they themselves had chosen to pursue.” But as gamers often play or work for hours without break, is that still creative passion?

STREAMING OR SURVEILLANCE?

Galloway writes that in the era of post-Fordist capitalism, the boundary between play and work becomes blurred. The sphere of play or non-productive leisure activity, and the workplace as the sphere of productive activity, cannot be differentiated as life is the site of valorisation. Human behaviour is turned into monetisable labour (2012, pp.135-136). That is why streaming, a real-time, and possibly all-time, activity, is ideal for value creation.

As we have trouble delineating between play and work, is it any easier to see the difference between streaming and (self)surveillance? Similarly to the effects of the commodification of play on our lives in general, the techniques and processes of watching players on Twitch are not necessarily an instance of innocent play. The online spaces, especially streaming, can be thought of as spaces of surveillance and control. After the Twitch acquisition by Amazon, the platform added some functions. That led users to stream non-video game or real-life content, which will most certainly further increase the value of the platform.

In *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, Byung Chul Han claims that returns are maximised with the exploitation of freedom understood as “/e/verything that belongs to practices and expressive forms of liberty – emotion, play and communication” (Han, 2017, p.3). That makes Twitch a perfect case for an ever-increasing value maximising space. As thought by Shoshana Zuboff (2015) about our era as surveillance capitalism: surveillance and profit-making converge. However, it is not surveillance as we know it from Bentham or Foucault. Andrejevic writes that it is more “peer-to-peer surveillance” or “co-veillance,” as it is not primarily the state that is watching, but peers monitoring each other (Andrejevic, 2007, pp.213-214). As Albrechtslund (2008) names that, “participatory surveillance.”

CONCLUSION

Twitch is a platform and platforms are a business model that has the ability to harvest and control big amounts of data (Srnicek, 2017, p.6), importantly so because they enable groups to interact (ibid., p.43). Focusing on platforms in the digital realm, the biggest players are few, as the platforms gravitate towards monopolisation. Network effects, the second important trait of platforms, mean that more users a platform has the better (ibid., 45) for their data-harvesting and monetisation abilities. That is essentially what counts in the attention-data economy: addicting users to sites and devices, directing them towards few different platforms, so, for example, “Amazon becomes a central fixture in their lives, an epicentre of leisure and consumption” (Foer, 2017, p.177).

Reading the case of Twitch through the lens of spectatorial labour, I argue that the value of this platform lies in the communities of streamers and their spectators. Their attachments, values, and desires, can be traced in the form of networks that enable Amazon, who owns the data, to know more about the consumption practices or incentives of their users. By knowing more about they users, they are able to manipulate their desires, and destroy the *free* attentional capabilities even more efficiently. Even if the attention of Twitch users is not of a *prime* quality, and is less valuable to advertisers, that is less important for a platform that is owned by one of the biggest stores in the world, Amazon.

Secondly, gamers or precarious workers for Amazon via Twitch, offer the platform valuable access to their personal data through streaming. Importantly so, because the gamers who profit from Twitch predominately enable their web camera and microphone, and thus might enable analysis of real-time emotional data.

Twitch is a case that spurs various insights in the nature of play, work, labour, life and desire in the 21st century. It is important to think that the experiences on Twitch are designed, and that we need to reconsider the value of *free* play for the exercise of creativity and imagination. The amount of money that Amazon spent on Twitch should be a warning rather than a welcome extension of work practices in our free (?) time that is ever more consumed by impulses demanding our split attention, our split souls.

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