

Interpassive Online: Outsourcing and Insourcing Enjoyment in Platform Capitalism

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For Robert Pfaller, who first proposed the concept in 1996, interpassivity is most straightforwardly ‘the preference of particular subjects for *delegating their enjoyment* rather than having it themselves’.¹ Interpassivity describes the pleasure yielded by a subject when his or her acts of pleasure are experienced via the body of another. Simple examples include telling your friends to ‘have a drink for you,’ egging them on to create an online dating profile or asking your kids to send you a postcard. Something like the common parlance for the idea is the concept of ‘living vicariously.’ For Pfaller, ‘rather than delegating their responsibilities to representative agents, interpassive people delegate precisely the things that they *enjoy* doing – those things that they do for pleasure, out of passion or conviction’.² To put this into the language of contemporary capitalism, we can call interpassivity outsourced – rather than delegated - enjoyment.

Both the general idea of vicarious living and Pfaller's definition of interpassivity seem to imply that interpassive acts or behaviours are not the dominant form of enjoyment found in contemporary (capitalist) social life but are rather an odd form of enjoyment which makes its presence felt on the edges of pleasure, as it were, perhaps present in all of us (though more common in some than in others) but tending to arise occasionally as moments of a strange circumvention or contradiction of the normal rules of enjoyment. While enjoyment is normally conceived of as our own and we usually want our pleasures for ourselves, interpassive moments seem to operate against this grain of logical capitalist enjoyment, or so it seems at first.

This short paper suggests that, contrary to such conceptions, there is a particularly prominent level of interpassivity visible in the emergent relationship between humans and machines which is coming to characterise the kind of 'platform capitalism' we can expect to see cemented over the next several decades. It asks – in opposition to the implications of the above conceptions - whether interpassivity is not in fact the dominant mode of enjoyment in contemporary online social life, just as outsourced labour is the dominant mode in the realm of work. Pfaller speculated that interpassivity might be connected to 'consumer capitalism' but I argue – albeit in a highly provisional way - for its specific role in (and ability to comment on) what Nick Srnicek and others have called 'platform capitalism;' a world of work and leisure dominated by an increasingly small number of major corporate powerhouses that are almost indistinguishable from state apparatuses and who hold extreme levels of technological and social power.³ Yet, I suggest not that all enjoyment is interpassive in precisely the sense described by Pfaller but that interpassivity has or is being transformed in this climate of platform capitalism.

The provisional proposal here is that what Mladen Dolar has called 'enjoying machines,' technology which enjoys on our behalf, are now one of the most common kinds of machine that humans interact with.⁴ Alongside this, I suggest the emergence of another interpassive form of enjoyment present in the relationship between humans and their

technology: not only machines who enjoy on the behalf of people but people who enjoy on the behalf of machines. On this point we can playfully suggest that even if the machine cannot 'enjoy', as humanist technophobes often remind us, it can nevertheless put us to enjoy on its behalf.

Finally, the article moves to discuss a third relationship in the technological-libidinal economy of interpassivity – perhaps the most important of all – which involves a situation where the machine operates not in the place of a person (as Marx defined technology) but as a mediator between humans, what McLuhan might call the medium or what we might now call the platform. In such cases a user outsources their enjoyment to another human through the platform, or alternatively is insourced by other humans via the platform to enjoy on the behalf of those other users. We could equally playfully put this last form of interpassive enjoyment into the language of Amazon Mechanical Turk, the outsourcing work platform where 'requesters' list jobs for 'turkers' to complete for a tiny reward way below a living wage. Many forms of social media play this role for enjoyment – rather than for work – and the suggestion here is that this revolution in the outsourcing and insourcing (turking and requesting) of enjoyment follows almost impossibly close on the tail of those new forms of economy and workforce organization. It is not, therefore, – as Pfaller may sometimes imply – that we often outsource work but occasionally outsource enjoyment - but that we must do, tend to do or necessarily do both at once. These increasingly prevalent types of interpassive pleasure then, are symptoms of developments in platform capitalism, but they are symptoms which are sometimes run ahead and loop back, showing us a frightful glimpse into the implications of platform capitalism as it develops.

These three forms of interpassive enjoyment are prominent in our online lives and essentially that almost all enjoyment in social life now involves at least one of these three forms of interpassive pleasure. It might be necessary to make a distinction between these forms of interpassivity, as Pfaller's original concept considered the preference of particular subjects for *delegating their enjoyment* rather than having it

themselves but not the preference for particular subjects to *have their enjoyment delegated* by others and did not attend to the machine who connects the user to its enjoyer or the enjoyer to its host. In today's world of enjoyment, it might be less a case of designating one form of enjoyment as interpassive and another as not being so, and much more a case of considering which form of interpassivity our moments of pleasure constitute and whom they serve.

Putting the Machines to Enjoy

Some of the early examples of interpassive acts given by Pfaller are technological ones. Interpassive behaviours are ritualistic, like the obsessional neuroses identified in patients by Freud such as his analysand under a compulsion to rinse round her wash-basin several times after washing and peculiar machinic examples from the last several decades include those TV viewers who obsessively programmed their Sky boxes to record hundreds of TV shows with little or no intention of watching those shows back, as if the box did the watching for them, and those academics who developed a relentless propensity for getting their university's photocopier to do their reading for them.⁵

Adding to these examples, themselves decades old now, we can think of some comparable appearances of interpassive robots which make use of the latest technology. One obvious robot who relied on interpassive pleasure to sustain its existence was HITCHBot, the 2015 robot who hitch-hiked around the US until it was attacked, its Baby Boomer followers living out their nostalgic hitch-hiking dreams of freedom and the open road vicariously by following its progress online. Other more prominent examples of using robots interpassively might be obsessive digital playlist curation on Spotify, and another prime example of an interpassive person would be Elon Musk, whose joy at sending his Tesla vehicle to space was palpable. Discussing the humorous example of city dwellers who drive SUV four-wheel drive cars precisely to get the off-road experience without having to leave the city limits, Pfaller argues that 'cultural capitalist goods are dispatchers of vicarious life; they

are interpassive media'.⁶ In this formulation the consumer is able to put the car to enjoy on its behalf, so that the individual pays to have experienced the pleasure of off-road driving but no longer needs to experience the pleasure for themselves. The above examples all involve this kind of relationship in which financial expenditure can produce outsourced interpassive enjoyment. As such the logic of interpassivity would be prominent in the world of commodities, a form of capitalism that is still with us but has a long history, which allows the commodity to produce a particular form of pleasure for those consumers able to expend capital on it. In such cases the commodity, whether technological of now, is employed as a strange kind of interpassive agent for the buyer.

Yet, the topic here is not the link between consumer capitalism and interpassivity but a more recent connection between platform capitalism and the dominance of interpassivity as a form of enjoyment experienced online today. It seems obvious to say that social media might be the ultimate realization of interpassive behaviour for the way it creates a norm in which the act of the subject and their enjoyment of the act is tied up with real and imaginary observers of the acts in question. Only some aspects of social media use would fit this original definition of interpassivity, however. One such example would be the sharing of articles without reading them. This phenomena may be partly about identification (with the shared article/image/post), and it may also show a kind of archiving drive (though this has moved to the 'save' feature of Facebook) but – in addition to these things - it also involves an interpassive pleasure in which the machine does the 'reading' for the user. The avatar could be seen as a representative agent through whom we vicariously live, a form of machine employed to enjoy – and to work - on our behalf. On the one hand the avatar liberates the user from the need to participate in certain 'enjoyments' directly (keeping in touch with friends and family, liking the posts of others, etc etc), and it also does the work of careerism and contact base-building, leaving us free to do the real 'work' which feel compelled to do, or allowing us to enjoy only the things we 'really' want to enjoy. In such cases, it is nearly impossible to

maintain a distinction between work and enjoyment, which is one of the most crucial features of platform capitalism.

Mladen Dolar links the emergence of enjoying machines with the idea of *la clique*, those organized and importantly paid applauders put to work in theatre (indeed perhaps since the origins of theatre) before the technology for 'canned laughter' - another prominent example of interpassivity - developed. Discussing old traditions of paying for applause, Dolar writes:

This new machine, which infallibly produced nothing less than glory, is an extension of a very old phenomenon, which I suspect might be as old as the invention of theater itself, and which in French has an unmatched economical and evocative name, *la clique*. It designates organized applause, the group of "hired hands" in the audience who applaud by prearrangement, most often for financial reward.⁷

It's not difficult to see that certain forms of social media, perhaps Facebook and Twitter in particular, may function in the guise of *la clique* today. It is not simply that we pay the machine (in the form of free content generation) to applaud us, but that the machine is put to work for us as a body who enjoys so that we are not required to do so directly. When we react to a post with the laughing or shocked emoticon, for example, we are passing the obligation to react – and its associated pleasures – to the technology itself: we enjoy it interpassively, delegating pleasure to the machine so that we are not ourselves required to act. It's of course not that the 'react' emoticon is representative of the subject's real-life reaction (most people write 'lol' instead of laughing and not after laughing), so that we are clearly in the realm of interpassive pleasure with almost every online social engagement. If there is any truth in this suggestion, it at the very least shows the prevalence of interpassivity today. It also, on the basis of the brief discussion here, suggests that the distinction between delegating work and delegating enjoyment may be finer than ever.

Enjoying for the Machines

It is tempting to consider the enjoyment generated in videogames in terms of Pfaller's notion of interpassivity. In a certain sense, we could say that videogames involve a version of vicarious living. If so, the model of the four-by-four car which never leaves the inner city might be a clue to the nature of interpassive forms of gaming, which offer the user a pleasure yield from an experience (the point is especially clear in the case of simulator games: flying, fishing, farming, and so on) through the body of the machine, removing the need for the gamer to physically go fishing to experience the pleasure in question. In videogames in general, we could say that avatars, characters, and other digital agents experience affects (or appear to) on the user's behalf and in response to their commands, so that the user enjoys vicariously through the body of the agent.

One could identify a difference in that the gamer is somehow present – albeit in a displaced way - at the moment of gaming, rather than doing something else, whereas the vicarious logic of 'having a drink on me' relies on not having time, energy or space to be present for the act. The answer to this lies Pfaller's earlier work *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture*, in which he discusses processes of *dromena* which appear to occupy the subject but in fact allow them to be somewhere else entirely on a psychological level. In acts of *dromena*, such as chanting, repeating lines or humming, 'the repetition of symbols can also cause one to have as little as possible to do with these symbols and the situation they describe.'⁸ Slavoj Žižek has written similarly that the appeal of *dromena* is that 'in my psychological interior I can think about whatever I want.'⁹ Gaming, seen as an experience of *dromena*, is an interpassive act where the digital agent goes through a process so the subject does not need to on a psychological level. In this way, videogames could be an example of a human putting a machine to enjoy in the way discussed above.

On the contrary, however, the interpassivity in gaming seems in general to turn in the opposite direction. It is not so much that the active user puts the digital objects in the machine to work or enjoy on their

behalf, but that the game itself – as a machine - puts the users enjoyment to work on its own terms. This would reverse Ian Bogost's idea that 'games are devices we operate' and suggest instead that we are operated by games.¹⁰ The point may need some psychoanalytic explanation.

There is a long history of considering videogames in relation to (or as a way to realize) existing desires, a point which may go as far as Pfaller himself, who countered the traditional idea that games make us violent by arguing that they are more likely to function as a kind of safety-valve outlet for frustrations than increase the amount of school shootings and violent attacks among the gaming youth.¹¹ Videogames, however, have a much more dialectical relationship with desire than is often thought, whereby they not only respond to existing desires but construct new ones and mutate older ones. Each game has a politics and an ideology which is experienced in a complicated way by the player. The gamer's experience could be considered in terms of the distinction between *drive* and *instinct* in psychoanalytic terms. While instinct comes from within, or at least seems to, drives approach the body of the subject from outside, propelling them in certain directions. The distinction originates in Freud and is re-asserted by Lacan:

Trieb gives you a kick in the arse, my friends – quite different from so-called instinct. That's how psycho-analytic teaching is passed on.¹²

Videogames are in the realm of drive rather than instinct, a point that would render ideas of games as wish-fulfillment redundant. Games do not respond to already existing wishes, natural desires or impulses. Instead, they propel the subject in new political and ideological directions while asking them to experience and feel the ideology of the game as if it were their own desire to move in those directions. Games are best conceived of as drive masquerading as or experienced as instinct.

The gamer, in this conception, is put to work for the logic of the machine, rather than putting the machine to work for its own pleasure.

While the game may have human owners and creators, and is obviously the result of political and social conditions surrounds its production, dissemination and use, it exceeds or combines these to impose its own ideology on the gamer by offering the gamer the chance to experience the game's own ideological positions, empathies and desires as if it were the gamers own pre-existing desire to do so.¹³ Videogames are machines which ask the user to enjoy on their terms, insourcing a human agent. While the machine may not experience interpassive pleasure, the user experiences a reverse form of interpassive enjoyment.

In this way, games offer something like the reverse of the social media 'react' feature discussed in the first section. Where Facebook 'reacting' is interpassive in the traditional sense of putting a piece of technology to enjoy for you, gaming is the interpassive opposite insofar as each piece of technology puts the user to enjoy for it. Robots may not enjoy, but they can put us to enjoy on their behalf. While traditional conceptions of interpassivity are 'outsourced' enjoyment, we could describe these forms of enjoyment as 'insourced' enjoyment, insofar as the subject is essentially recruited by the technology to enjoy for it and according to its logic, rather than the other way around.

The Platform is the Message

I have so far attempted to split interpassivity as it seems to function in regard to new technology in platform capitalism into two categories, but there is a third and more important form of interpassivity which is even more prevalent than the two forms discussed above. This form involves the now normal situation in which the primary role of technology in the libidinal economy of humans is to operate as a medium through which humans re-double and organize their enjoyment by insourcing and outsourcing themselves and each other as agents through which to enjoy. Both the above examples of social networks and videogames contain strong trends of this final form of interpassivity as well as the forms discussed in each of the above sections. This kind of enjoyment, which involves an interpassive connection between two or more humans whose connection is circuited through a piece of technology could be

given another categorical term. If typical interpassivity (embodied by social media 'react' features) is outsourced enjoyment and its reverse (embodied by gaming) is insourced enjoyment, this final form could be termed 'co-opted' enjoyment.

Some definition of the platform is needed to approach this type of enjoyment. Defining the concept of a platform in *The Stack*, Benjamin Bratton uses the etymology of the word to explore the implications of a technical platform in the age of modern machines:

By at least 1803, *platform* takes on more explicitly political meaning, as in a "statement of party policies." All three of these connotations (platform as a plan of action, as a stage for a plot, and as proposed rules of governance) are important for understanding *The Stack* as a platform and for platform sovereignty in general. One is set of instructions, one is a situated place where action is played out according to plan, and one is a framework for a political architecture. Already these connotations are slipping and sliding into one another.¹⁴

Social platforms – including both social media and multiplayer videogames - are a set of instructions, a stage on which interaction takes place, and politics itself. Bratton's work, which argues that politics is a machinic system, reminds us that the platform might seem like nothing more than a stage on which politics can play out, but in fact is it much more than that: technology and machines have a politics of their own. Of Facebook itself as a platform, and specifically identifying the react feature discussed in this article, Bratton writes:

Peers *like* what you say, they share your offerings, and, in time, they subscribe to you, the individual character in your own reality mini-show. The fabrication of the self becomes the primary project of this platform, at least for the *User*, but in time, this general model could take many different forms, as subjectivity and agency are dispersed into nonlocal networks and assignments.¹⁵

Interpassivity is important in the construction of the user's 'own reality mini-show' since the process requires others (imaginary and real) to be insourced to enjoy each post, photo or video posted by the host of the mini-show, while each host is themselves outsourced to play the role of enjoying audience for others. The logic of the process is something like the following formula: I enjoy on behalf of another user, providing that yet other users enjoys on my behalf. Facebook then, creates a kind of infinite looping and re-doubling of interpassive connections between people, things and digital objects, a new libidinal exchange economy. The more interpassive a society becomes, the more dependent it becomes on the platform as the means through which the subject can connect to the other agents required to generate pleasure. The pleasure of uploading an avocado to Instagram cannot be achieved without access to the platform which makes it possible to be the agent though which others can live vicariously, while simultaneously allowing us to live vicariously through other agents.

Bratton's quotation also points to the danger of the situation. While the 'the primary project of the platform' (in the case of Facebook) may be the fabrication of the self, this is only so from the perspective of the user. If the user sees the platform only as platform (as a stage for a plot) then it labours under the illusion that it does little more than 'connect people' (as platform owners frequently repeat) but if one is attentive to the function of the platform (as political governance) then the transformative potential of the platform becomes more visible. For the user, the platform may only be a means to realize the project of self fabrication, but the platform itself may lead into a rather different political future by dispersing and re-organizing subjectivity and agency in new ways. As such, these theorizations of platform society are an update to McLuhan's famous maxim that 'the medium is the message,' pointing to the importance of form over content and of the technology over the subject's use of it.¹⁶ One possible transformation in the subject of Facebook – a result of the politics of the technology itself rather than the user's experience or the content on the platform - is its increasing dependence on co-opted interpassive pleasure. The enjoyment of Facebook then, which appeals to the user because it allows them to cultivate their mini-reality show

identity (a user- and content-focused impression of the platform), is co-opted by the platform and potentially put to use for other political ends that those which appear on the user-facing side.

Conclusion

The existence of interpassivity, at least in its early conceptions, showed a hiccup in the smooth function of capitalist logic, or a gap in what Mark Fisher has called 'capitalist realism.'¹⁷ The delegation of enjoyment was important because it questioned the capitalist narrative about our relationship to the worker and (now) to the robot labour force. The capitalist subject had been delegating work tasks and responsibilities for centuries, with the dominant general line that the subject delegates such tasks in order to free up its own time for other pursuits: namely the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment. Today, work is delegated to robots rather than to other people, though this may not be an exclusively new development since in *Capital* Marx defines a machine as 'a mechanism that, after being set in motion, performs with its tools the same operations as the worker formerly did with similar tools'.¹⁸ On the other hand, the platform may be a type of machine which operates not as Marx described but in a new role not previously filled by a human agent. In the typical narrative, the privileged subject puts the other – whether machinic or human - to work, so that they themselves can enjoy. In this older situation, if interpassivity's existence was acknowledged, the logic of this system broke down, or so the initial argument went. Now, we are looking at a rather different future where interpassivity has emerged without breaking the smooth logic capitalist realism. We might go further and say that interpassivity could be conceived of the form of enjoyment most harnessed by, celebrated by and conducive to a new form of platform capitalism which dominates economic and social life today.

Various theorists have approached the problem of working for free in the age of the platform in terms of what has been called 'heteromation,' the process by which economic value is derived (primarily by corporations) from the user's 'pleasurable' time spent on digital media. Enjoyment, now inseparable from work, is harvested by the

platform for economic gain. Certain necessary redefinitions of work which have aimed to combat the trend have shown that while we are worried about automation and the lack of work in the platform capitalist future, there is a parallel problem that in fact we are all working much more rather than less than in previous in pre-Facebook years. Playing with the Wages for Housework movement, 'Wages for Facebook' curator Laurent Ptak writes:

They say it's friendship. We say it's unwaged work. With every like, chat, tag or poke our subjectivity turns them a profit. They call it sharing. We call it stealing.¹⁹

The question of enjoyment becomes paramount in such conditions because the platform works by harvesting our pleasure to generate profit, making the apparent distinction between work and enjoyment a vital part of how this form of capitalism functions. Asking 'what will we do in the post-work utopia?', Smith and Pffanebecker counter some of Srnicek and Williams' optimism about the post-work age of automation:

The ideological, economic and political measures they present do not take account of the problem of desire. Our desires are never simply our own, and therefore work can never be driven simply by 'our own desires'.²⁰

Interpassivity makes this point – vital for both libidinal and economic futures - visible to us. As the concept that calls the relation between work and enjoyment into question, interpassivity could be seen as the enemy of a platform capitalism that wants its subjects to turn profit by their very acts of enjoyment. This puts interpassivity on an odd boundary, since it can also be seen as the form of enjoyment most encouraged in the era of the platform, as has been argued above. Platform capitalism paradoxically asserts and erases the distinction between enjoyment and work, asserting the distinction it so that it can generate profit from enjoyment without accountability and dissolving it so that its subjects become its workers in the very moments they are

most 'free' to enjoy. Interpassivity then, might be becoming more and more dominant as a form of enjoyment, but as such it becomes more and more important as a concept for those who progressively oppose or question such developments in platform capitalism. If interpassivity is now the logic of conformist enjoyment rather than a radical edge to enjoyment patterns, as a conceptual tool it is more vital than ever in making visible how we are organized via enjoyment in social life today. Interpassivity confronts the problem of desire in platform capitalism, one of the most pressing political issues of this transitional moment.

The final suggestion here is that the current shift of power (from individual users, traditional media, states and even older corporations) to the platform takes place not only on the level of work – as embodied by Amazon Turk – but also on the level of enjoyment – as embodied by the examples discussed in this article. It might seem rather obvious to say that Uber (platform in/outsourcing in the realm of work) could not exist without Instagram (platform in/outsourcing in the realm of enjoyment) but the point seems oddly obscured in most discourse on the subject. The insourcing, outsourcing and co-opting of enjoyment, I hope to have suggested in this brief and very much provisional article, is indistinguishable from the dangerous re-organization of work we are in the midst of today. If we want to tackle the problems of work in the age of the platform, we need to pay close attention to patterns of enjoyment. It might even be the case that such reformations in the libidinal economy provide clues as to the futures we can expect in political and financial economies. At the very least, they make visible the effects of the newest economic changes on the level of subjectivity.

¹ Robert Pfaller, *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press, 2017), p. 1

² Pfaller, *Interpassivity*, p. 5

³ See Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (London: Polity, 2017).

⁴ Mladen Dolar, 'The Enjoying Machine' in *Penumbra*, eds. Sigi Jöttkandt and Joan Copjec (Melbourne: Re-Press, 2013), pp. 85-102.

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- ⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 115-128 (p. 120)
- ⁶ Pfaller, *Interpassivity*, p. 14
- ⁷ Dolar, pp. 86-7.
- ⁸ Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners* (London: Verso, 2014) p. 177
- ⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 94
- ¹⁰ Bogost, Ian, *How to Talk about Videogames* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 1.
- ¹¹ Pfaller, *Interpassivity*, p. 11.
- ¹² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: W. W. Norton, 1998), p. 49.
- ¹³ For the full breadth of this argument see Alfie Bown, *The Playstation Dreamworld* (London: Polity, 2017).
- ¹⁴ Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2015), p. 43.
- ¹⁵ Bratton, p. 126.
- ¹⁶ Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 7-23.
- ¹⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester and Washington: Zero, 2009).
- ¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 495.
- ¹⁹ See Ptak's project at <http://wagesforfacebook.com/>
- ²⁰ James Smith and Mareile Pffanebecker, 'What Will We Do In the Post-Work Utopia?' at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2016/06/17/the-long-read-what-will-we-do-in-the-post-work-utopia-by-mareile-pffanebecker-and-j-a-smith/>