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Playing distressed art: Adorno's aesthetic theory in game design

Abstract

The discussion on games as (not) art has been raging for decades without reaching a consensus. It is argued here that the ontological status of games is irrelevant for the perception and development of aesthetic experiences in videogames. Instead, game design should be regarded as ripe to convey the experience of art according to established aesthetic theories. The essay presents Adorno's aesthetic theory and highlights its reflections in the games *Papers, Please* and *Observer*. It then describes how they were synthesized into a critical gameplay experience in the author's game *Distressed*. The latter may be regarded as an example of a method in game studies in which the aesthetic potential of games is explored by creation rather than analysis. Arguably, this reveals the importance of epistemological approaches towards games and art instead of the predominant ontological ones.

Keywords: games as art, game studies, Adorno, aesthetic theory, critical theory, *Distressed*

Introduction

Whether videogames are art or not is a discussion that has sparked much controversy, but also reform, in the last decades (Jenkins 2005; Pearce 2006; Tavinor 2009; Juul 2013; Sharp 2015; Parker 2018; Nguyen 2020). While art and

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movie critics have seemed almost insulted by the idea of elevating videogames to the status of *high culture* (Ebert 2010; Jones 2012; Myers 2020), many game developers and researchers push for the “*games as art*” claim (Jenkins 2005; Adams 2008; Rauscher 2017). However, it should be highlighted that this discourse has been arguably dominated by the urge to either discredit or legitimize “games as cultural practice” (Bourgonion et al. 2017, p. 4). That implies that most claims regarding games as (not) art are teleological and often appear side-tracked by their authors’ discrediting or legitimizing agenda.

This essay shall not attempt to discuss further the ontological status of games as (not) art (Tavinor 2016, p. 59) but to break with the discourse. It is of no interest here whether games are art, works of art, or artistic at all. What is argued is that games have the potential to evoke aesthetic experiences (Nguyen 2020, pp. 11–12). To be more precise, my argument is that games can be designed according to established art theories (i.e., Kant’s, Hegel’s, Adorno’s) to produce distinct aesthetic experiences, which players also perceive as such.

Theodor Adorno’s theory of aesthetics is grounded in critical theory and requires art to make “invisible forces visible, making things (political, economic, and social injustices) evident” (Hellings 2014, p. 19). His aesthetic conception in regard to (modern) art takes much from Marx’s notion of the *mode of production* (Marx 1844/2009) to understand art in the way it is produced (Benjamin 1935/2003) and in how it depicts “the crisis of experience” caused by capitalistic alienation (Adorno 1970/1997, p. 34). In a videogame context, one could draw a comparison to Ian Bogost’s idea of how game design is rhetorical and how it “make[s] arguments about the way systems work in the material world” (2007, p. 47). Regardless, to comply with Adorno’s theory of aesthetics, the arguments games make must be critical and revealing in order to allow players to *experience art* (Adorno 1970/1997, p. 84).

Games such as *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013) and *Observer* (Bloober Team 2017) exhibit evident traits of Adorno’s understanding of art. While in *Papers, Please* systemic unfairness is endorsed by game design to evoke an experience of distress and moral conflict (Formosa et al. 2016; Morissette 2017; Sicart 2019), *Observer* pastiches classic cyberpunk films to create an implicit critique of capitalism (cf. Kilgore 2020). These games have been mostly praised for the intimidating gameplay experience they offer, which I argue results from the embedded core thought of Adorno’s theory on *painful art* (Adorno 1970/1997; Juul 2013; Helling 2014). Further in this article I will analyse the relevant gameplay elements and present how they served as a main inspiration for the indie cyberpunk game *Distressed* (CtrlZ Games Collective 2021).

My team and I have tried to embed the thought of painful and revealing art within the game design of *Distressed*. The game unveils cyclically between going

to work to earn money and spending that money on videogames in one's free time, the capitalistic hamster wheel in which most working-class people find themselves (Horkheimer & Adorno 1945/2002; Marcuse 1964/2007). Traversing through this holistic experience is so fundamental to the intended gameplay that examining its sub-components by themselves (i.e., mechanics, levels, graphics, story, sound) can hardly address what our team envisioned as the idea behind the game. Therefore, the development and operation of *Distressed* are described below from the creator's perspective, presenting how Adorno's theory was deliberately embedded in the game's design.

Adorno's aesthetic theory

A short introduction to Adorno's aesthetic theory may help us understand how games immerse players. Adorno's theory of aesthetics is rooted in Hegel's phenomenology and is intermedial in nature. Here, an object (i.e., cultural artefact) in focus of a subject (i.e., consciousness) "becomes alienated from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation, and is only then revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth, just as it then has become a property of consciousness also" (Hegel 1807/1979, p. 21). This dialectic enables an ongoing "unfolding of truth" that is not centered within the object but within the subject (Adorno 1970/1997, p. 168; Helling 2014, p. 67).

This truth, emerging in the subject, is the aesthetic experience according to Adorno. However, the *absolute* truth art must possess is not that of "world-history" (Hegel 1807/1979, p. 178; Milne 2003, p. 69) but that of deception, illusions, and dependencies (Horkheimer & Adorno 1947/2002, p. 130; Adorno 1970/1997, p. 56; Richter 2006, p. 134). At this point, Adorno adds a crucial modification to Hegel's aesthetics by turning to Marx (Helling 2014, p. 49). The truth (the aesthetic experience) that art needs to evoke in the subject is the feeling of exposure to one's alienation, the pain of being unfree, and the grotesqueness of society. "The socially critical zones of artworks are those where it hurts; where in their expression, historically determined, the untruth of the social situation comes to light" (Adorno 1970/1997, p. 226).

According to Adorno, art is always a social fact that highlights humanity's ruination by manipulative and exploiting forces of the socioeconomic system in place (Zuidervaart 1991, p. 81; Ross 2015, p. 60). In revealing these truths, art "remind[s] the world of its lost realities: freedom and life, beauty and happiness, truth and reconciliation, hope and possibility" (Helling 2014, p. 66). That is often mirrored in formal aspects of the artwork itself. These challenge conventions by exceeding boundaries of genre and technique (Zuidervaart 1991, pp. 50, 221; Adorno 1970/1997, p. 199). Art preserves the social reality it simulates while simultaneously

negating it in its form. This makes art a manifestation of bondage and revolution at the same time: bondage in the form of the social order that the artwork represents and revolution as the invocation to break free from that order (Helling 2014, p. 35; Ross 2015, p. 133). The aesthetic experience, thus, spawns within the dialectic of what art reveals and the potential utopia it suggests. Art is essentially balanced through an internal opposition.

The contamination of art with revelation would amount to the unreflective repetition of its fetish character on the level of theory. The eradication of every trace of revelation from art would, however, degrade it to the undifferentiated repetition of the status quo. A coherence of meaning – unity – is contrived by art because it does not exist and because as artificial meaning it negates the being-in-itself for the sake of which the organisation of meaning was undertaken, ultimately negating art itself. Every artifact works against itself (Adorno 1970/1997, p. 106).

And in working against itself, being bondage and revolution at the same time, art becomes the ultimate social critique, reflecting on a “wrong life that cannot be lived rightly” (Adorno 1951/2005, p. 39). However, Adorno himself was aware of the fact that the power of an artwork itself is not sufficient to enforce an epiphany. As described earlier, the aesthetic experience emerges from the dialectic unfolding of truth between subject and object; an interplay of two agents. Thus, it is required of the subject (the human) to engage with the object (the artwork) critically in order to unleash its emancipatory forces (Adorno 1951/2005, p. 42). In other words, it is not enough to see or feel the pain that the artwork exposes us to. What is needed is our critical reflection as well our immersion into the aesthetic experience.

Papers, Please: Aesthetics of immorality

Traces of Adorno’s theory can be found in the videogame *Papers, Please* made by Lucas Pope (2013), in which one takes the role of a border guard officer in the fictional communist state of Arstotzka. One “must process the documents of travellers, deciding who to admit and who to reject or detain. There are rules to be followed and moral choices to be made if and when they are bent or broken” (Formosa et al. 2016, p. 212). From a game design perspective, *Papers, Please* exhibits caricatural traits of a serious game for job training purposes (Lellock 2015; Hanussek 2021). The overall gameplay experience is constructed around a recurring working day schedule in which players have to reject or admit incomers according to a rotating set of rules. At the end of each day, players receive a wage based on how many people they accurately processed. The wage has to be used to pay bills and provide

for one's family (i.e., food, rent, medicine). Within this repetitive level design, the main storyline is inserted through scattered events, in which players sometimes have the option to align either with terrorists or with the state. The game has multiple endings and is over once one of the story-based endings is achieved, once players fail to pay their rent, or once all family members die. The described cyclical level design in *Papers, Please* became a foundational aspect for the gameplay experience developed in *Distressed*.

The game design enforces a systemic unfairness that financially disadvantages players (i.e., low wage, rising rent, illness of family members). Within this environment, players repeatedly face moral dilemmas that involve bribing. For example, terrorists promise money for being allowed to enter the country illegally, or a co-worker provides a bonus for more detained immigrants (Formosa et al. 2016, p. 213). Besides the worrying financial situation – a sword of Damocles hanging over players' heads – decisions are made under immense time pressure and receive, in most cases, no direct feedback (Sicart 2019, p. 151).

The gameplay experience has been frequently labelled as captivating but far away from what one would call normatively enjoyable or pleasurable (Lellock 2015; Formosa et al. 2016; Morrisette 2017; Sicart 2019). Juul has discussed the phenomenon of games that operate beyond traditional pleasure principles with the *paradox of painful art* that demonstrates that “1. People do not seek out situations that arouse painful emotions. 2. People have painful emotions in response to some art. 3. People seek out art that they know will arouse painful emotions” (Juul 2013, p. 37). This paradox is often explained through the catharsis theory, which expects a form of sublime knowledge as compensation for painful experiences (Juul 2013, p. 39).

Through the critical arguments *Papers, Please* makes by simulating a punishing reality (cf. Bogost 2007), the presence of Adorno's aesthetic theory is detectable. The aesthetic experience with which the game engulfs its players is a harsh confrontation with the notion of morality itself. How can we make moral decisions if they will destroy us and the ones we love? How can we live a *right* life in an inherently wrong world (cf. Adorno 1951/2005, p. 39)?

Observer: Alienated aesthetics

Apart from *Papers, Please*, the game *Distressed* has been inspired by *Observer* (Blobber Team 2017), especially in the context of alienation and labor which were used as core building blocks within the concept of *Distressed*. *Observer* can be visually and thematically categorized as cyberpunk (a world entrenched in techno-capitalism, humans physically immersed in technologies). Mechanically, it exhibits evident psychological horror traits (first-person perspective, walking simulator aesthetics,

hide-and-seek gameplay). Despite having received no academic attention, the game has been celebrated widely with top ratings and reviews and even received an enhanced version in 2020 (Evans-Thirlwell 2017; LeBoeuf 2021; Observer (PC) 2021).

In the game, players adopt the role of a cyborg detective Daniel Lazarski in Kraków in the year 2084. Lazarski is called to a crime scene in District C, where primarily social outcasts live. While he is looking for clues, a lockdown is triggered in the district. Suddenly, Lazarski finds himself in the middle of an ongoing murder spree. The story unfolds with players trying to hunt down the murderer while exploring the district, talking to inhabitants, and hacking into victims' brains.

Although the game is itself primarily story bound to the murder case, its meta-narratives take on a contextualizing role, adding a considerable dimension of social critique. For example, in the second brain hacking sequence concerning Helena Nowak, players enter her unstable and psychotic memories. These memories are partly built around her working environment (office scene) and her home (domestic scene). The former is a large-scale office at the hyper-capitalist corporation Chiron, consisting of computers, which suggests immaterial labor jobs. Uncountable human shapes can be observed passing through and working in cubicles in time-lapse. These shapes are faceless but they are visibly stressed, exhausted, and confused. Simultaneously, players are engulfed by a wall of sound, noises, voices, and whispers that represent a busy day at the office. Later on, the sequence takes players to Helena's home, where domestic overextension is in focus. The walls are made of washing machines, and the floor is covered in laundry. It is raining detergent, and unwashed dishes stack up high. At the same time, players repeatedly hear her husband saying, "Hey baby, I'm home!"

The sequence unfolds further and carries much more detail than mentioned, but the aspects described are sufficient to set these two scenes into context. What the scenes represent is the worker's or, to be more precise, a woman's fate under capitalism. The office scene displays definite elements of alienation or estrangement.

Estrangement is manifested not only in the fact that my means of life belong to someone else, that my desire is the inaccessible possession of another, but also in the fact that everything is itself something different from itself – that my activity is something else and that, finally (and this applies also to the capitalist), all is under [the sway] of inhuman power (Marx 1844/2009, p. 54).

The office is infested with anonymity, and all computers display only the corporate logo of Chiron, expressing a significant unrelatedness between workers and their work. The symptomatic depression within the body language of the

faceless workers is a manifestation of what it means to be alienated through capitalistic forces.

The domestic scene highlights another critical dimension within the whole sequence – namely, that of not just being a worker but also a woman. In this case, players are confronted with the burden of traditional gender roles in which women are supposed to be responsible for housekeeping (cf. Thomas 1988). The mounds of laundry and detergent, unwashed dishes, and walls of washing machines are cynically contrasted with the husband's voice announcing his return home.

Both scenes are audio-visually presented with horror elements (i.e., sudden shifts in audio volume, jump-scare-like events). The game has translated the issues of alienation and exploitation by traditional capitalistic systems into playable horror. In utilizing devices of the horror genre, *Observer* enforces a streamlined experience on its players. The aesthetic experience that is evoked may be horrifying based on its dynamics; however, the game only becomes truly revolting through its embedded social critique. In *Observer*, players are unpleasantly confronted with total alienation and exploitation. That raises issues not only about our contemporary mode of existence and its *hustle culture* (Griffith 2019), but also about the role of women in conservative capitalist countries like Poland (home of the developers of *Observer*).

Both *Papers, Please* and *Observer* formulate vital critical perspectives by simulating fiction, deducted from real-world conditions. These perspectives are embedded in punishing aesthetic experiences woven into the mechanics and narrative of these games. And in this very dialectic, between exceeding the boundaries of the ordinary through what they communicate while remaining bound to the formal aspects of videogame technology, the games become disciples of Adorno's aesthetic theory.

Distressed: Experiencing labor/leisure dialectics

The aspects of Adorno's aesthetic theory visible in *Papers, Please* and *Observer* became an inspiration for *Distressed*, an indie cyberpunk game that combines 2D point-and-click aesthetics with a 3D arena shooter to critically thematize labor and leisure. The game takes place in a dystopian future, in the year 2069, when work is fully automated, which worries many people. However, at the same time, no *free* citizen wants to get back to work. To calm society and to show that the human race is still in control of automated machines, prisoners get labor deals that allow them to live in apartments with entertainment systems, as long as they attend 9-to-5 assembly line jobs. These deals are issued by the Hypercorps Federation, the most powerful company on the planet. It also owns all factories where every contractor ends up working.

Players act as Xen, one of the prisoners who received a precious get-out-of-jail card. The game is designed in a dialectic between work and leisure. Each cycle begins in a 2D world, graphically inspired by the slums and low-life districts in *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) and *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii, 1995). Players can explore the labor district and talk to NPCs to learn more about the socio-political situation within the game (see Figure 1).

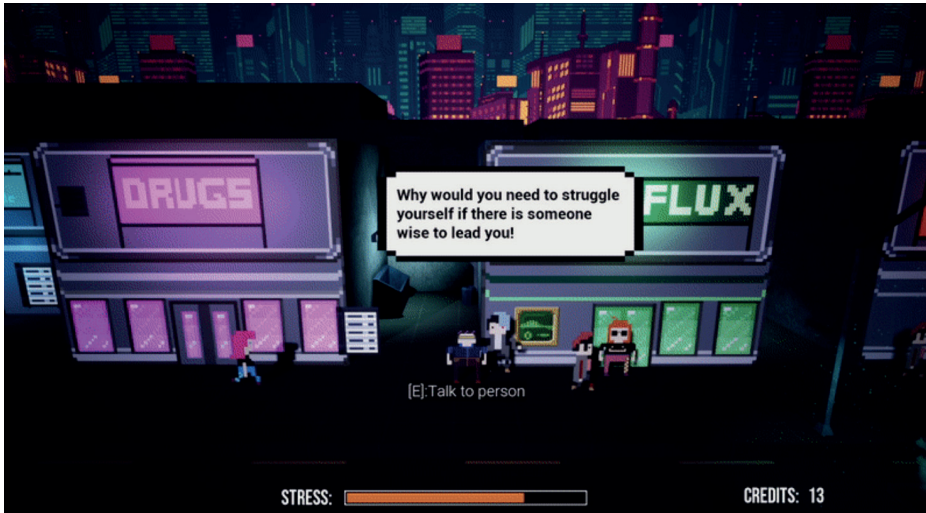


Figure 1. Talking to a tech-optimist on the streets of Xen's district

Despite the exploratory aspect, the game is designed to make players go to work at a transshipment point owned by the Hypercorps Federation. The job consists solely of scanning parcels on an assembly line (see Figure 2). Players receive one credit per scanned and processed parcel. With ten credits, they can leave their workplace and go back to their appartement.

In the apartment players can access their entertainment system, which to play an arena shooter visually inspired by *Tron* (Lisberger 1982). At this point, the game switches into a first-person shooter in which players have to collect keys and defeat enemies (see Figure 3) in order to reach a portal that ends the level. The game then switches back into the 2D perspective, where the cycle starts anew. The game possesses five levels that are based on the same cycle but provide progressing narrative elements in the 2D section and varying difficulty and space arrangements in the 3D section. Also, the game's stress bar mechanic indicates the degree to which Xen is (di)stressed. To lower stress, one needs to win games in the 3D section. Also, the game's stress bar mechanic to decrease stress by donating credits to a homeless person. If the stress bar reaches 100%, the game is over.



Figure 2. Xen's job at the assembly line



Figure 3. Shooting for leisure (in 3D)

The game was originally developed for a seminar on Cyberpunk aesthetics in 2020/2021. It was around five months in development from the brainstorming stage until its initial alpha upload on the platform itch.io. I was responsible for the concept, the story, sound and music. The primary objective of the game was to adapt cyberpunk aesthetics within a prototype. Early in the development process, it was clear that the

game would be based on a critical concept, given the nature of the cyberpunk genre and its critical techno-capitalistic tropes (Kilgore 2020, p. 48). The first major issue in development arose in the conflict between one side of the team opting for a 2D game and the other aiming for a 3D game. After much consideration, we decided to try to combine both perspectives under an umbrella concept. I proposed to represent a dialectic of labor and leisure à la Marcuse where the meaning of leisure is contradicted by its *containment* of the capitalist mode of existence.

Here, the social controls exact the overwhelming need for the production and consumption of waste; the need for stupefying work where it is no longer a real necessity; the need for modes of relaxation which soothe and prolong this stupefaction; the need for maintaining such deceptive liberties as free competition at administered prices, a free press which censors itself, free choice between brands and gadgets (Marcuse 1964/2007, p. 9).

This dialectic is visually represented in the game by the shift in perspective. The mundane labor aspect is traversed in 2D while exciting leisure playtime is experienced in 3D. In addition, the assembly line job has been deliberately designed to induce disenchantment by pressing one button to scan a parcel, having to wait until it reaches the assembly line, and having to do that at least ten times to finish a shift. That enforces a stupefying impact on one's consciousness, just as many labor jobs do.

Bored but glad to disengage after receiving at least ten credits, players are supposed to *run* back home and access the entertainment system to immerse themselves into a 3D shooter. We did our best to provide a challenging but satisfying experience that would stand in stark contrast to the 2D assembly line aspect of the game. The 3D sections are kept short and action centred in playtime (around three minutes if players focus on objectives) to be perceived as dynamic and engaging. Once the stage is cleared, the cycle repeats and players have to get back to work. To continue playing the *fun* part of the game, one needs to go back to one's mundane work and earn money to afford it, again and again. Even if one were to enjoy the 2D part of the game more than its 3D counterpart, one would struggle to survive because of the stress mechanic. And in order to mentally persist despite the pressure and dullness of life, one has to play. Play is changed into a desire necessary to fulfill and thus transforming it into something *like* labor. Or in Horkheimer and Adorno's words: "Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again" (1947/2002, p. 107).

The cyclical game design, which is heavily influenced by *Papers, Please*, is essential for the intended aesthetic experience that *Distressed* shall evoke within its players.

We presented our game to hundreds of players during a videogame Expo in Salzburg in 2021 (see Figure 4). That brought an unsurprising but interesting observation to light. There were two kinds of players: those who left the booth just after one cycle and those who went through more cycles. When asked what they thought about our game, the former kind would address the 3D part as the engaging section of the game, while the latter would be able to comprehend the concept, which made the whole experience enjoyable to them.



Figure 4. Playtesting at the Level Up Festival in Salzburg, Austria

Distressed remains heavily inspired by *Papers, Please* and *Observer* but goes a step beyond these titles in gameplay and visual aesthetics. In regard to gameplay, *Distressed* uses the core experience of a labor simulator from *Papers, Please* but does not provide the state of flow, accessible in the latter through clearly defined instructions and manageable challenges.

Papers, Please also allows involvement due to powerful moral dilemmas intertwined with a border guard officer's work. In *Distressed*, the activity of scanning parcels is as unengaging as it sounds. The game tries to represent the dull and stupefying experience of 9-to-5 labor without having any playful illusions of its nature. *Distressed* does not treat this part of the game as a space ripe with gamification potential.

What allows *Distressed* to transcend its inspirations is its in-game shift between being a 2D side-scrolling point-and-click adventure at day and 3D arena shooter

at night. When games offer levels that break with their core gameplay (like the arcade game *Fire and Sword* available in *Observer*), these shifts occur as an element of surprise or feature of the overall game experience. *Distressed*, on the other hand, makes this break central to its gameplay experience. Players cannot shift from 2D to 3D once in a while to get a break from the core gameplay experience. Rather, they are caught in between this break.

Papers, Please and *Observer* thematize dark and critical topics but their gameplay still tries to keep players engaged by conventional feedback systems. *Distressed* wants them to break free of those. In the finals of Subotron's prototype competition in 2021, *Distressed* was criticized for using abusive game design choices. According to most of the jury, designing a game that pushes the player to stop playing was simply ridiculous from a player and investor perspective. Unfortunately, the jury seemed to not consider the concept nor the fact that the game had not been created as a commercial product.

At any rate, if players allow *Distressed's* game design to guide them, they will experience art in line with Adorno's aesthetic theory. It is an aesthetic experience that reveals bondage and painful social realities through a self-balancing dialectic between contradicting dimensions, modes of interactions, narratives, and mechanics. *Distressed* cynically allows players to experience a "wrong life that cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno 1951/2005, p. 39), yet with a real chance of breaking free.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt in applied game studies. I have tried to go beyond theoretical game analysis by using an aesthetic theory as a blueprint for the creation of a videogame which functions as an argument itself. Whether games are art or not is, from my perspective, absolutely irrelevant, as long as they can evoke aesthetic experiences that inspire people to see the world differently, challenge their views to realize their dependencies, and remind them of alternative ways of living. A message to provoke critical awareness needs to be painful; it must be unpleasant and exhausting. Change is unpleasant and exhausting, at least initially.

The games that have made use of Adorno's aesthetic theory (intentionally or not) have proven to evoke experiences that are captivating, inspiring, and sustainable, even beyond the normative pleasure principle. In *Distressed*, my team and I tried to embed Adorno's aesthetic theory within the core game design while learning from *Papers, Please* and *Observer*. We wanted the game to evoke an exhausting aesthetic experience to prove a point; to unveil the bondage of our times, the dialectic between labor and leisure. I would not go so far as to call *Distressed* a piece of art, but I would go to great lengths to argue that it evokes an aesthetic experience à la Adorno.

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