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Joseph Macey
Gamification Group
Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences
Tampere University
Finland

Joseph Macey is a researcher at the Gamification Group, Tampere University whose work is concerned with the consumption of digital media. A primary area of interest is the convergence of contemporary digital media, exemplified in the emergent phenomenon of video game-related gambling. His research interests also include the interaction between consumption of different forms of media, adverse social behaviour online, problematic media consumption, and the cognitive biases of media users.

Brian McCauley
Media, Management & Transformation Centre
Jönköping International Business School
Jönköping University
Sweden

Brian McCauley is a researcher at the *Media, Management & Transformation Centre*, Jönköping University and a director of the Esports Research Network. His primary interests are gaming culture and esports with a focus on the actors who engage in the ecosystems. His research includes work on social media, mobile gaming, esports actors, gender issues and developing regions.

Mind Games: Playtest as an allegory for Liquid Modernity

> *"Configurations, constellations, patterns of dependency and interaction were all thrown into the melting pot, to be subsequently recast and refashioned; this was the 'breaking the mould' phase in the history of the inherently transgressive, boundary-breaking, all eroding modernity. As for the individuals, however- they could be excused for failing to notice; they came to be confronted by patterns and figurations which, albeit 'new and improved', were as stiff and indomitable as ever."* (Bauman, 2000 p. 6)

This chapter analyses the episode "Playtest" (Brooker and Trachtenberg, 2016), with particular attention being paid to the ways in which digital games embody contemporary socio-economic realities of western life. "Playtest" has been described as an episode which lacks a specific

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moral lesson or social commentary; indeed Charlie Brooker, the series creator, referred to it as simply "a romp … good fun" (Hibberd, 2018). However, it remains a cultural product which offers commentary on contemporary socio-cultural realities, both inviting and provoking discussion amongst fans, critics, and even academics.

"Playtest" is self-evidently concerned with video games; aside from the overt use of games to drive the narrative arc of the story, the episode contains numerous references to games, both subtle and explicit. Central to our interpretation of this episode is the gamification of society (McGonigal, 2011)[1] and the wider cultural logic of *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2000). We will first provide a brief summary of "Playtest" before demonstrating that the episode functions as an allegory for liquid modernity, one which can be further contextualised through the consideration of life in an increasingly gamified world. Furthermore, given the obvious significance of games in "Playtest," this work will examine the evolving role of video games in facilitating and promoting contemporary practices related to the economic, social, and cultural value systems of liquid modernity.

Episode Summary

"Playtest" tells the story of Cooper, an American taking the trip of a lifetime in order to escape the pain of his father's death from Alzheimer's. Cooper leaves behind his grieving mother, to whom he feels he cannot connect after the loss of his father, and continually ignores her calls throughout his travels. In London he connects with Sonja, a technology journalist, before financial problems force him to take a short-term job with a cutting-edge video game company.

At the offices of the game company, Cooper is seated in a white room and is implanted with experimental augmented reality technology used to run a new game. After the implanted device has been setup, Cooper experiences an augmented reality version of *Whack a Mole*. He is then taken to meet the head of the company who informs him that the implanted technology will access his neural activity in order to generate a personalised game experience and 3D graphics that only he can see. He will be testing the most personalised, immersive survival horror game possible.

Following the meeting, Cooper is taken to an empty mansion where he is left alone, although he is connected via an earpiece to those who are administering the playtest. Cooper is tasked with staying in the mansion as long as possible while the augmented reality technology taps

[1] See also ludification (Raessens, 2006; Muriel and Crawford, 2018) discussed below.

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into his deepest fears. Despite the assurances that the game is harmless, the ensuing experience is highly traumatic, culminating in the realisation of his worst fears: the implanted technology begins to dig into his brain and, in a cruel parody of his father's fate, Cooper loses all memory and sense of self.

After the implant is removed, Cooper recovers and is able to travel home. Upon arrival, his grieving mother is unable to see Cooper, and when she dials his phone number the ringing of the phone takes Cooper back to the original white room and he has a seizure. We see that the equipment is still being calibrated, the playtest has not yet begun. It is revealed that the telephone call interfered with the testing of the implant and Cooper died as a result, shouting for his mother in his final moments.

Liquid Modernity

Bauman's theory of liquid modernity is communicated in the final book of a trilogy exploring the effects of globalization on economic, political, and social structures (1998), and the decline of the public sphere and the resultant lack of collective influence, outlining the need for global political reconstruction (1999). The final book, *Liquid Modernity* (Bauman, 2000), concludes the trilogy, representing an increasingly relevant work that examines how we have moved away from the solid social structures of the past and towards a more fluid modern existence, highlighting the need to question the notion of what it means to be human.

For Bauman, modernity can be defined as many things and measured by many different markers, but in the case of liquid modernity it is defined and measured as pertaining to the individual. Liquid, meaning fluid, refers to the ever-shifting roles of individuals within modern society; "indeed, in our contemporary age the relationship between the individual and society is changing because the concepts of identity, individual and individuality are becoming meaningless" (Palese, 2013 p. 1). Bauman identifies a phenomenon where we can view Man as a tourist in his own life, where he exists as a consumer in a consumer-driven society, adapting to changes in a fluid manner that allows him to maintain a modern identity characterised by consumption. Bauman points to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Huxley's *Brave New World* as two diametrically-opposed dystopian visions that share the common foreboding of a tightly-controlled world. In his own words, "Orwell and Huxley did not disagree on the world's destination; they merely envisaged differently the road which would take us there were we to stay ignorant, obtuse, placid or indolent enough to allow things to go their natural way"

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(Bauman, 2000 p. 54). The concept of liquid modernity itself points to a tightly-controlled world, albeit not with an overarching political nemesis but, rather, wholehearted devotion to the cult of modern consumerism.

In the condition of liquid modernity, individuals are required to renegotiate concepts of identity and self-image as they navigate a world in which they are presented with a seemingly endless number of options. It is an existence in which the stability of previously defined roles and boundaries have dissolved, as can also be seen in the work of Sennett (1999). This dissolution of the established norms of modernity is particularly evident in the growing influence of digital games in contemporary society. Games have always been a significant part of the socio-cultural fabric, even offering opportunities for transgression of existing social boundaries, albeit in restricted circumstances (Hill and Clark, 2001; Geertz, 1973; Wilson, 1986). However, the ever-expanding influence and availability of digital games in contemporary society sets them apart from the games and play of earlier periods. Originally an entertainment media like any other, they have evolved into a prominent means for the construction of both personal and cultural identities (Raessens, 2006), one which, arguably, exceeds that of other cultural products. In the contemporary condition of liquidity, or Sennett's "flexibility," traditional social structures used as reference points for personal identity have been weakened; a space has been created in which concepts of identity are being constructed in a more experiential, playful manner. We are defining ourselves according to our fandoms, our experiences - such as travel –, our hobbies - such as gaming -, and our sexual preferences; not because they are more important than previous frameworks, but because they are all that is left to us.

Gamification/Ludification

Bauman's views on the modern world as a consumer-driven game can be best encapsulated by the rise of gamification within contemporary society. The technique of gamification is one which provides added value to consumers by increasing motivational affordances to services, thereby engendering more gameful experiences (Hamari, Koivisto and Sarsa, 2014)[2]. Gamification has also been proposed as constituting a phenomenon, rather than simply a process; one which is a constituent part of our contemporary culture (McGonigal, 2011; Koivisto and Hamari, 2019; Hamari, Koiovisto and Parvinen, 2019). However, both of these approaches have attracted criticism, indeed the last decade has seen a sustained debate within

[2] Note 1: Gameful design is a concept intimately linked to gamification, the two can be hard to distinguish as it is argued that the primary difference lies in the designer's intentions, for the purposes of this work we will use the more commonly used term "gamification" as an umbrella term.

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game studies concerning the nature, and relevance, of gamification (McGonigal, 2011; Seaborn and Fels, 2015; Bogost, 2015). While some have critiqued the very concept of gamification, others have attempted to distinguish between the promotion of gameful experiences in non-game contexts and the wider cultural significance of games and play.

Consequently, the concept of ludification has been employed as a means of describing the rise of play in different areas of culture and society. Proponents of ludification distinguish it from gamification in that the latter term refers solely to the application of game elements in non-entertainment spheres while ludification is concerned with the spread of play as a practice in our everyday lives (Mäyrä, 2017). In this way, gamification is a specific example of the wider, more far-reaching, process of ludification (Raessens, 2014). No matter the theoretical positioning, that which is beyond doubt is the evolution in cultural significance of games, and of play from predominantly leisure activities into a near hegemony. The dominant view of play as being a luxury, a wasteful and unproductive use of time, is receding, with games being employed as educational tools, as economic drivers, and as art (Dillon, 2016; Thibault, 2016; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca, 2019). Indeed, games are emblematic of the ways in which liquid modernity is characterised by transient concepts of self within social systems, of previously solid distinctions becoming mutable. Bauman has previously identified that playfulness has moved beyond childhood and that adults in the condition of liquid modernity embrace the concepts of play throughout their lives: “the mark of postmodern adulthood is the willingness to embrace the game whole-heartedly, as children do” (Bauman, 1995 p. 99).

Analysis

> *“But if you never err, you can never be sure of being in the right either. If there are no wrong moves, there is nothing to distinguish a move as a better one, and so nothing to recognise the right move among its many alternatives – neither before nor after the move has been made.”* (Bauman, 2000 p. 63)

The uncertainty of choice highlighted by Bauman (2000) is reflected in the loss of stability and increasingly fluid nature of society. This is a theme that is present in the majority of *Black Mirror* episodes, which show us the potential of technology to disrupt our experiences in the world around us. But it is Cooper’s experiences, as envisaged by the creators, that truly encapsulate Bauman’s vision of the changing world. We must note that the narrative arc of the

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"Playtest" episode is one in which time is not strictly linear, and the final scenes return to earlier points in the story. However, for the purposes of this interpretation of the episode we will discuss events as they are presented to the viewer.

Life in liquid modernity

As stated above, Bauman envisages life in the condition of liquid modernity as being characterised by the transition from a solid modernity to a more fluid and transient form of existence. As we are introduced to Cooper, we see his initial experiences in an increasingly ludified world as undeniably positive; he is able to negotiate a path through the world according to his desires and is able to overcome setbacks.

A brief slide-show of Cooper's travels across the world further re-enforces this ever-shifting modern experience; he is accumulating quintessential experiences and accruing cultural capital, from the beaches of Thailand to running with the bulls in Pamplona. This montage illustrates the fact that "instagrammability" functions as a means of assigning value to a destination based on the potential to create attractive imagery for social media sharing (Hosie, 2017) and that, increasingly, social media has become a space for users to relate to themselves and others in a playful manner (Deumert, 2014). We can see, therefore, how the value systems of liquid modernity have become more ephemeral in nature, they have moved away from the established, fixed, reference points of earlier society and are open to renegotiation.

This can be seen when, having left Sonja, Cooper finds out that his credit card has been cancelled. Instead of approaching the problem as could rationally be expected, for example by contacting his family, he seeks help from Sonja, a transitory acquaintance. In this way we can see that social intimacy is being negotiated and redefined through developing online practices (David and Cambre, 2016). It is gamer girl Sonja who helps him make the fateful decision to accept the job at SaitoGemu. Sonja then ups the ante by convincing Cooper that taking a photo of any new technology will be worth a lot more than any payment he receives for the job. Bauman's vision of a functioning society is one wherein the individual questions their reality, but here Cooper fails to question the ethics of his choices in deference to a pretty girl whom he has only just met. A society that doesn't question itself is one that Bauman views as ill in that individuals becomes enslaved to the narratives created around them (Kutarna, 2018). Cooper here has made the decision to unquestioningly defer to his fluid reality, with the questionable ethical implications of his choices reflecting the challenging situations which arise when ethical responsibility is shifted from the structure of society to the individual (Bauman, 1993).

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Love in liquid modernity

The final leg of Cooper's world tour finds him in London where, despite being alone in a foreign country, he is easily able to satisfy his desires, his need for pleasure and stimulation, by using the dating app Tinder to find and contact a potential partner. Tinder has been described as fulfilling a host of needs including a sense of excitement and fun (Sumter, Vandenbosch and Ligtenberg, 2017), and as one of a host of emergent technologies actively changing the development of interpersonal relationships (LeFebvre, 2018). The traditional structures that once anchored how we develop relationships continue to shift and have been deemed responsible for the 'dating apocalypse' (Sales, 2015) where traditional relationships have lost to a casual hook-up culture. While many celebrate the freedom and choice inherent in this development, it may reflect Bauman's belief that the prevailing ideas of our day actively limit us through restricting awareness of the wider society; we are presented with options selected by others, or by algorithms. As David and Cambre (2016) point out, Tinder actively excludes users from freely defining their interactions with others through the swipe logic that shapes users' social dynamics; indeed Bauman specifically identified 'computer-dating' as symptomatic of the erosion of the solidity and security offered by romantic relationships which he termed 'liquid love' (Bauman, 2003). Hobbs, Owen, and Gerber (2017) argue that apps such as Tinder are not necessarily as toxic as Bauman predicted, but for Cooper his Tinder liaison with Sonja represents the high point of his journey yet also the beginning of his demise.

The themes of sexuality and inter-personal relationships continue with a brief interaction between Cooper and Sonja in which he discovers that she plays games. Although not explicitly stated, it is evident that Cooper's interest in Sonja increases after she acknowledges that she is a keen game player. This interest speaks to the trope of the 'gamer girl' in which female gamers are notable by their existence in the masculine space of gaming, accordingly they are presented as objects of fascination and are eroticised. It is a process of fetishizing the other akin to that of orientalism, with all the inherent power relationships replicated (Said, 2014).

Given that games have been presented as a means of negotiating identities, and of providing experiences which allow players to experiment (Waggoner, 2009), the dominant socio-cultural values and images of mainstream gaming are overwhelmingly young, white, and male despite the reality having been proven to be different (Shaw, 2012). As with the opportunities afforded in liquid modernity, the apparent breadth of roles and experiences offered by games is something of a chimera. The very presence of the gamer girl highlights the lack of visibility of females in the prevailing culture of gaming, despite the number of females playing

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contemporary games, for she reveals the clearly-defined expectations of what a 'real gamer' should be, and those who do not accord to this idealised construction are dismissed, relegated to the margins. At the same time, the gamer girl affirms the masculinity and heterosexuality of the gamer, replicating and reaffirming the socio-cultural norms of wider society (Butt and Apperley, 2016; Dowling, Goetz, and Lathrop, 2019). Indeed, the wider cultural significance of the hyper-sexualised gamer girl can be recognised in the growing body of gamer girl pornography (Cole, 2018).

Despite the apparent positivity of the gamer girl within the episode, signified on the one hand by Cooper's elevated interest in Sonja and on the other by the implicit celebration of the idea that girls can be gamers, it is in fact a trope which highlights existing power structures and cultural assumptions. Thereby illustrating the underlying conflict that exists in the condition of liquid modernity: that the apparent freedoms offered to individuals are predominantly illusory, as they are those which have been created by existing hegemonies. As such, individuals cannot truly become free without questioning the power structures of society and those "opportunities" which are provided to them. If an individual is simply consuming these opportunities, they are in fact reinforcing the status quo and accepting those roles which have been selected for them.

Play in liquid modernity

When Cooper initially embarks upon his journey, he is able to overcome the boredom of a long-distance flight by immersing himself in a game played on his mobile phone. When asked to turn his device off he continues to use play to insulate himself from a potentially troubling experience, and to ease the anxiety of a fearful child, by pretending that the increasing turbulence is actually the bumps and shakes of a roller-coaster. In these scenes we are easily able to understand the positive aspects of play which can both insulate us from potential unpleasant situations and also offer us the ability to reframe experiences in order to make them more manageable. Play, and games, in this sense are undeniably positive.

This theme continues later in the episode with the commencement of the playtest, after which the episode is named, wherein Cooper is introduced to the experimental augmented reality technology used in the new game. This scene presents games as being at the cutting-edge of technological development, legitimizing their status in a society in which innovation and invention are venerated. For Bauman, the human condition in the stage of fluid modernity is one where progress is no longer a temporary measure towards a finished state but a perpetual, never ending challenge and necessity, that is in effect what it means to stay alive and well.

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Cooper's reaction to this augmented reality game is one of extreme positivity, the game is pure, unbridled fun. Following this initial test, there follows a discussion between Cooper and Shou Saitu, the enigmatic genius behind the games company, concerning the nature of games and the experiences they afford to players. The game designer states that games are "safe spaces" in which fears can be both confronted and overcome. In this statement we can easily recognise the conceptualisation of play as a social contract, an activity which occurs within a delimited and known context; the "Magic Circle" of play (Huizinga, 2014 [1938], Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Stenros, 2014).

This point marks a change in the narrative arc, one in which the dramatic atmosphere of the episode, and the game experience communicated to the viewer, becomes significantly darker and more traumatic. If the first segment can be seen to communicate the contemporary realities of life in liquid modernity, the second represents a future in which the potential consequences of this existence are realised.

After the meeting with Shou Saitu, Cooper is taken to an old manor house in the grounds of the company estate. Recognising the building, he is told that the house was 3D-scanned and replicated in the company's most famous survival horror game *Harlech Shadow,* a game Cooper played previously. Bauman (2000) identifies non-spaces, such as airports, public transport, and hotel rooms as those which are un-colonised; they are free of all identity markers and discourage settling in, functioning as places where what needs to be done should be done. The Harlech House, here as a physical embodiment of a previous construction of computer code, represents a non-space for Cooper in that he is now alone in a space that exists only for the task at hand. It is a space which foreshadows the experiences yet to come as it transgresses boundaries between virtual and real, it is simultaneously one and the other.

This blending of real and virtual, both in respect to the house and to the nature of augmented reality, has implications for how play is both experienced by the player, and how it is communicated to the non-player. The work of Huizinga, which gave rise to the concept of the magic circle, describes play as occurring inside an imagined space apart from normal life where rules operate differently and we are allowed to experience things not allowed in our regular lives (Huizinga, 2014/1938; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). The use of digital technology to create personalised games and gameful experiences – the digital gamification of the physical environment – is already a reality with games like *Pokemon Go* functioning as training grounds in which people are beginning to evolve ludic literacies within the wider public space (Mäyrä, 2017). Consalvo (2009) goes somewhat further in arguing that games can no longer be seen to

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occur within a bounded space, that play and games have spread throughout our lives to such an extent that they are defined solely by context.

The potential future of play presented in "Playtest" is one which expressly questions the notion of the designated and defined play space as the direct interface with the subject's brain, and results in an experience which is deeply personal, one which cannot be observed or understood by others. The already negotiable, context-specific, boundaries of play have been completely dissolved as even the player is unable to distinguish between the game and reality. There is no social contract, there is no way of identifying what is, or is not, a safe space. This is the culmination of liquid modernity, all boundaries between reality and fantasy have been dissolved, and the player/subject has lost all agency.

No matter the context of play, the presence or otherwise of a mutually-negotiated magic circle, participating in play has tangible real-world effects, both positive and negative (Sublette and Mullan, 2012). Indeed, the lack of player agency described above speaks to a redefinition of what it means to play games and the real-world consequences of play in virtual worlds. As new spaces and opportunities for play are realised and made available for consumption, predominantly via online and/or digital technologies, it is natural that players experiment with the new possibilities afforded to them. Given its ability to function as a liminal space, the online environment is a fertile ground for transgressive play (Waskul, 2005; Sicart, 2015), whether that be griefing in MMOs (Chesney et al., 2009) or trolling in discussion forums and message boards (Phillips, 2015). Those indulging in such behaviours often frame them in terms of a game, as entertainment, however, in such a game only one of the participants is aware of the rules of play while the other(s) have been reduced to the status of game pieces. Griefing also serves to transcend the immediate context of "play", with such behaviour having wider socio-cultural and economic effects (Bakioglu, 2009). A more consensual re-imagining of what constitutes a game can be found in the practice of "abusive game design" in which the presence of the designer is made obvious through elements which seek to frustrate the player, thereby creating a form of dialogue between the two parties (Wilson and Sicart, 2010). The practice of abusive game design is a direct challenge to the established orthodoxy of the contemporary games industry which players are simply consumers, and games are judged in terms of usability (Kultima, 2015).

Abusive game design is distinguished from "dark design" in that it actively reveals the power and influence of the designer, thereby encouraging players to recognise, and to question, existing norms. Dark design, however, is coercive in that it uses game mechanics to drive

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behaviours which may not conform to the value systems of the players, behaviours which may even be to their detriment (Zagal, Björk and Lewis, 2013). In the vast majority of situations, dark design patters are employed to drive player monetisation, to further drive increased consumption and financial expenditure.

For Bauman, it is the notion of consumerism which best illustrates how a person can consider themselves free yet, in reality, remain shackled within postmodern society. Indeed, most activity within liquid modernity is presented as a form of shopping within a society and culture defined as consumerist (Bauman, 2000). A such, it can be argued that these alternative conceptualisations of games are models for negotiating the context of liquid modernity in that they actively, and aggressively, question the established cultural narratives with which they have been presented.

We see here a reflection of discussions concerning the nature, and function, of enjoyment in contemporary life: in his recent work, Bown describes how our culture trumpets the right, even the requirement, to enjoy ourselves while at the same time prescribing that which is to be enjoyed. A consequence of this perspective, this lionising of individual enjoyment at the expense of responsibility to others, is that it reinforces the dominant socio-economic and cultural structures of our society, and it provides willing capitalist subjects (Bown, 2015). Yet, enjoyment also offers a way to transcend these prescribed roles, these designed interactions, through the exploration of "jouissance" (Lacan, 2005), the pleasure beyond pleasure. Jouissance is a form of enjoyment which lies beyond socially-accepted definitions of pleasure and can take many forms, but at heart it is transgressive in that it allows enjoyment of experiences beyond those that are constructed for us while, at the same time, revealing the nature of those constructed experiences. Through enjoyment, through games and play, we can explore the boundaries placed upon us, we can seek to become more active participants in the construction of our identities.

Conclusion

> *"…by asking questions about our own society, we become freer. 'An autonomous society, a truly democratic society, is a society which questions everything that is pre-given and by the same token liberates the creation of new meanings. In such a society, all individuals are free to create for their lives the meanings they will (and can).' … 'Society is ill if it stops*

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questioning itself.' We become enslaved to the narratives being manufactured all around us, and we lose touch with our own subjective experiences." (Kutarna, 2018).

The narrative arc of "Playtest" can be seen as an allegory for life in the contemporary age, one in which notions around games and play serve to highlight both contemporary realities and also potential futures. The episode opens with Cooper leaving his family home in order to escape his relationship with his mother, one that has become unbearable since the death of his father; here we see the emergence of liquid modernity as a reaction to the previous, solid modernity - it is a means of coping with the shifting responsibilities and relationships which linger on in a changed world. The apparent freedoms of liquid modernity, its ephemeral nature, are demonstrated in the photo montage of Cooper travelling the world, living a transient and self-gratifying life, moving from one pleasure to the next according to his own desires. Finally, we observe the consequences of liquid modernity: human suffering, political and economic instability, and the dominance of transnational, moneyed elite. This is communicated in the need for Cooper to use an app in order to have enough money to survive, resulting in him signing up for the play test run by a Japanese company in an English country home – one decorated in a blend of hi-tech and orientalist aesthetics - effectively giving himself to this unbounded elite. This, in turn, leads to his traumatic final experiences and death.

In the first half of this episode Cooper appears to be liberated in that he travels the world free of the burdens of home life. However, this is illusory as he does not seem to be questioning the world, merely moving within well-established tropes: the character even dismisses the notion of "self-discovery" with a casual shake of the head when talking with Sonja in the bar. In the second half of the episode, he is very literally a slave to a narrative which is manufactured around him, although the narrative is constructed from his subjective experiences. Furthermore, at no point does he question the societal structures around him, or even those who are inserting experimental technology into his brain: he is a willing and acquiescent member of society and, most chillingly, a test subject.

"Playtest," then, is not simply a body horror tale concerning the potentially dehumanising effects of technological advancement, but neither is it merely "a romp." It is, instead, a means of understanding contemporary socio-economic realities and a possible future that awaits a compliant and unquestioning population. More significantly, however, the episode highlights the evolution of the socio-cultural and economic importance of digital games in the condition of liquid modernity. As a consequence, we can see that contemporary practices surrounding the

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consumption of digital games offer an avenue through which we can confront, and overcome, manufactured narratives. We are not limited to the role of consumer as prescribed by dominant forces; by questioning how and what we consume we can create new forms of interaction which expose the previously obscured boundaries, thereby establishing a dialogue between societal stakeholders.

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