

Araştırma Makalesi | Research Article

Frankfurt School's Critical Theory and a Critique of Video Games as Popular Culture Products

Frankfurt Okulu'nun Eleştirel Teorisi ve Popüler Kültür Ürünleri Olarak Bilgisayar Oyunlarının Bir Eleştirisi



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Abstract

Frankfurt School's critical theory provides a framework to study mass media. In Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer, two of the most prominent theorists of the School, coined the term "culture industry" to discuss the state of the entertainment sector. However, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School were either dead or they simply did not analyze the case of video games when the medium became an important agent both in social and economic terms. The main argument of this paper is that, as an inseparable part of the entertainment sector of today's capitalist societies, video games are eligible for an analysis as products of the culture industry. It is argued in the study that the fantasy worlds of video games divert people's attention away from the problems of capitalist societies. Further, the commodities are claimed to be getting increasingly standardized and are aimed at providing easy pleasures to consumers. Besides, a discussion of video games is carried out in accordance with the view that the video games of today seem to cater more to casual gamers than "serious" gamers, transpiring a dichotomy akin to that of high culture versus low culture.

Keywords: Communication Studies, Frankfurt School, Critical Theory, Culture Industry, Video Games, Popular Culture Products.

Öz

Frankfurt Okulu'nun eleştirel teorisi, kitle iletişim araçlarını incelemek için bir çerçeve sunmuştur. Okul'un önde gelen teorisyenlerinden Adorno ve Horkheimer Aydınlanmanın Diyalektiği'nde eğlence sektörünün durumunu tartışmak için "kültür endüstrisi" kavramını kullanmışlardır. Bununla birlikte, bilgisayar oyunları hem sosyal hem de ekonomik açıdan önemli medya ürünleri hâline geldiğinde Frankfurt Okulu'nun eleştirel teorisyenleri ya ölmüş ya da bu medya ürünlerini analiz etmeme yolunu tercih etmişlerdir. Bu makalenin temel argümanı, günümüz kapitalist toplumlarındaki eğlence sektörünün ayrılmaz bir parçası olan bilgisayar oyunlarının kültür endüstrisi ürünleri olarak ele alınmaya uygun olduğu yönündedir. Buradan hareketle, mevcut çalışmada bilgisayar oyunlarındaki fantezi dünyalarının insanların dikkatini, kapitalist toplumların sorunlarından uzaklaştırdığı öne sürülmektedir. Ayrıca, bu ürünlerin giderek daha standart hâle geldiği ve tüketicilere basit zevkler sağlamayı hedeflediği de çalışmanın iddiaları arasındadır. Günümüzün bilgisayar oyunlarının "ciddi" oyuncuların çok sıradan oyunculara hitap ediyor gibi görünmesinin, "yüksek kültüre karşı alçak kültür" benzeri bir dikotomiye ortaya koyduğu düşünülmekte ve bilgisayar oyunlarının bu bağlamda bir tartışması yürütülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İletişim Çalışmaları, Frankfurt Okulu, Eleştirel Teori, Kültür Endüstrisi, Bilgisayar Oyunları, Popüler Kültür Ürünleri.



Introduction

The Frankfurt School is one of the two most significant schools of thought in the field of sociology (the other one being the Chicago School). It is the one which provided a framework to study the effects of mass media with ideological concerns in mind. Indeed, the theorists of the School not only looked systematically at the media in a critical manner for the first time, they also introduced ideology as a concept of investigation in media studies. This was mostly due to their suffering at the hands of Nazism, which is an ideology itself with great impacts on the ways of thinking of the those who witnessed it.

Today, the Frankfurt School is associated with critical theory. The main focus of the School's criticism was on society and culture, more specifically mass media. Two prominent members of the School, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Max Horkheimer, coined the term "culture industry" in their book entitled *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1947. In it, they drew parallels between a factory-like system and popular culture products. According to Wilson, the culture industry holds both a literal and a metaphorical sense for Adorno. In the literal sense, many cultural products are manufactured through technological means. Media products of all kinds, be it visual ones such as movies, auditory ones such as radio programs or written ones such as magazines, were likened to the standardized products manufactured in factories. More important for Adorno, however, were the dynamics behind the distribution of the said products. The manufactured "culture" functioned as a tool to lead the masses into a state of apathy, as a result of which the capitalist status quo was preserved (Wilson, 2007, p. 17).

This state of apathy could be the result of two things: contentment or numbness. According to the theory, mass media operates very much like industries, constantly rendering the masses content and docile by way of bombarding them with "kitschy" products which let them dream, hope and feel relaxed; the stereotypes that they provide people with minimize the complexity of the world and reality and are thus thoroughly enjoyed (Maigret, 2014, p. 88). By contrast, the culture industry might also create some kind of an effect of numbness in the masses. In other words, what acts as opium for critical theorists is not religion as was put forward by Marx himself, but the media.

Many members from the Institute of Social Research, which served as the institutional foundation for the Frankfurt School, being of German-Jewish descent, were forced into exile by the gradually-increasing influence of Nazi ideology over the European continent. During this period, the members sought asylum first in Geneva in 1933 and then in New York in 1934 (Maigret, 2014, p. 86). Considering the fact that a social theory could not be independent of the background of the one(s) who developed it, what the members of the School experienced in Nazi Germany and in the USA helped form the basis of their theory: Hitler had used the radio very effectively to rise to power and in the meantime, German televisions were broadcasting entertainment programs, as if to cover up what was happening behind the scenes. Furthermore, the glamorous world of entertainment in the USA also contributed to the development of critical theory as we know it today (Maigret, 2014, p. 90).

In the same vein, it could be claimed that it was no coincidence that the culture industry held great importance to neo-Marxist critical theorists: Culture took the form of a commodity, something to be bought or sold and gained profit from in modern capitalist society (Kızılçelik, 2013, p. 419). As two of the most influential figures of the School, Adorno and Horkheimer criticized this "consumable" culture that modern society

imposed on the masses by discussing how it is a profit-driven industry and not a simple, innocent process of expression. The culture industry does not give people the freedom to express themselves. On the contrary, it coerces people to conform to a system for which profit is the number one priority and keeps them in a torrent of sameness, repetition and predictability:

In a film, the outcome can invariably be predicted at the start—who will be rewarded, punished, forgotten—and in light music the prepared ear can always guess the continuation after the first bars of a hit song and is gratified when it actually occurs (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, pp. 98-99).

In criticizing Enlightenment and modernity, Horkheimer and Adorno note that art lost its critical and free character (Bronner, 2011, pp. 51-52). Furthermore, just as art was no longer autonomous, it dulled the consumers' creativity, robbing them of independent thinking. The starting point for Enlightenment might have been "desirable" ideals such as progress, equality, freedom, rationalism, toleration, autonomy and taking on science to explain the universe through empirical observation instead of having blind faith in dogma, but pointing to a dialectic formation, Enlightenment created the exact opposite of what drove it in the first place.

Capitalism, bureaucracy, and science—all expressions of instrumental rationality—constitute the real core of Enlightenment. They turn nature into an object of use, progress into alienation, and freedom into control. Autonomy is a nuisance and critique is a threat. Enlightenment may be associated with such ideals. But its real goal is standardization and control. In the name of liberation, its advocates wound up fostering a rationality of technical domination. The irrational beliefs that the Enlightenment originally sought to destroy thus reappeared as its own products (Bronner, 2011, p. 55).

Technical domination does not end with the many cases practiced on nature. The technical advances attained through Enlightenment give a movie producer, for example, the means to string together parts, but the parts do not necessarily relate to the whole. The glamorous special effects in a blockbuster movie are there to give a particular scene prominence—the amount of money spent on them is what is important here, the bigger and flashier the explosion, the more money was spent on creating it—and that scene is what should be remembered from the movie; it is what the audience should talk about after leaving the movie theatre, because it is the sensational or the presumed "selling" part of that movie. Therefore, in most cases, unity between the parts of a movie is often sacrificed to give the spotlight to the parts that are more likely to make the movie a commercial success. As a consequence, one could simply forget the movie in question (Wilson, 2007, p. 28). Another example from music could be that of one-hit wonders. In popular culture, a singer becomes well-recognized thanks to a single song, produced to make the singer famous, and more often than not, the rest of the songs in their album do not hold up. In other words, the singer lacks in aesthetic quality.

As should be clear by now, critical theorists were not only interested in the producers of the culture industry, but also in those on the receiving end of it: the masses. As someone well-trained in music, Adorno's understanding of art was clearly elitist and he was against easy pleasures (Maigret, 2014, p. 90). Pleasure, in and of itself, pointed to a condition where people would be oblivious of themselves and society and surrender to the status quo. Pleasure derived from art presented just as much of a problem. Adorno asserts that aesthetic art is critical, negative, dark art and he references Schubert, who questioned the existence of "happy" music, in his endeavors to question and criticize cheerful art

(Adorno, 2002, p. 40). It could be claimed that Adorno sees easy pleasures provided by popular culture products as a way of the bourgeoisie to exert control over people and not "buying" these pleasures is a way of showing resistance.

There is no doubt that the Frankfurt School and its critical theory contributed to media and communication studies immensely. In fact, much of what we exclaim today to criticize the media originated in the ideas put forward by the members of the School. However, as with any other social theory, critical theory itself received some criticism. One point of criticism of the theory that immediately comes to mind is that it is elitist due to its harsh analyses of popular culture. One could ask, for example, if the ending for all movies is really as easily predictable as proposed by Adorno. Critical theory was also criticized for its main trait, that of criticality for having a dark envisioning of the future. In *The Myth of the Framework*, Popper notes

Marx's own condemnation of our society makes sense. For Marx's theory contains the promise of a better future. But the theory becomes vacuous and irresponsible if this promise is withdrawn, as it is by Adorno and Horkheimer. This is why Adorno found that life is not worth living. For life is really worth living only if we can work for a better world now, and for the immediate future (Popper, 1994, p. 80).

Were the Frankfurt School members wrong, though? Were the premises of critical theory regarding popular culture and more specifically, the fierce criticism voiced by Adorno regarding culture industry merely the faint treads of a false prophecy? The aim of this study is to analyze a form of media that was absent during the heyday of critical theory: video games. The study revolves around the idea that what was asserted regarding the products of the culture industry in Adorno and Horkheimer's time holds true for a contemporary form of media well after the theory was established. To show this, an attempt will be made to investigate the gradually increasing interest in video games by faculties of media studies and then to apply the key tenets of critical theory to video games. In this respect, the production processes and contents of video games as well as player motivations in the consumption of video games will be analyzed through the critical theory lens.

Video Games as the "Hidden Gem" of Media Studies

Although the images conjured up in one's mind when the term "video game" is uttered are usually consistent and the term does not require much explanation, its usage has actually changed throughout the years. Instead of starting from a definition taken from a dictionary, it could be more useful to focus on the words "video" and "game" separately, as noted by Wolf (2008, p. 3). The "video" part is not problematic, as it is used simply to denote what kind of a game we want to talk about or more specifically, to make a distinction between "electronic games" or "computer games" and "video games". While both the terms "electronic games" and "computer games" are synonymous with "video games", they are different in that they do not have to make use of video technology.

The more complicated part to define is "game". Just like dice games, card games, conversation games, singing games etc., video games enjoy the status of a leisure activity and yet the word "game" may hold different meanings for different people. At this point, the elements constituting a game seem more appropriate than a semantic investigation of the word's different definitions. Wolf regards conflict (against opponents or circumstances), rules (defining what is and is not allowable), player ability (involving skill, strategy, strength and the like) and valued outcome (such as winning as opposed

to losing) as the common elements found in a game. He adds that video games are no different (Wolf, 2008, p. 3).

Video games have long been neglected by social scientists since they were considered as materials not holding any social significance. When video games constituted data for any sort of social research, it was mostly related to an attempt to understand how badly they affected youth. Indeed, the direct effects of video games have long been associated with such negative outcomes as increased aggression, decreased school achievement and attention deficiency. Additionally, addiction to the medium itself proved to be a “problem” that needed to be addressed by scholars on many occasions. The opposite was also true—some studies revolved around the idea that video games might have positive aspects to them. For example, one of the first theories developed for video games and their effects in society, known as the catharsis theory, posited that performing aggressive acts digitally in a video game might lead the player to not perform them as often in real life (Feshbach & Singer, 1971).

Many reasons could be listed as to why video games have been treated like a step-child in social sciences, studied, for the longest time, only partially, and yet none would be more valid than the fact that they mostly cater to a specific age group. One could conduct research on television or books to gather information regarding many different social groups, but video games have mostly been products used by younger people. It does not seem to be a matter of when a medium came into our lives, either. The Internet appeared rather late in the chronology of the media shaping the lives of humankind and yet the amount of research on it is quite voluminous.

One might be tempted to ask “Why study video games at all? Maybe they deserve the paucity of attention?” However, video games do hold significance in the lives of not only the young, but of older age groups as well and they constitute a multimillion-dollar industry. According to 2020 Essential Facts about the Video Game Industry (entertainment software association, n.d.), 214.4 million men and women in the USA play video games and players under the age of 18 comprise 21% of the total amount of players in the country, whereas those aged 18 to 34 amount to 38%, 35 to 54 26%, 55 to 64 9% and 65+ 6%. This explodes the myth that video games are only played by the young as a pastime. While it is true that it is mostly young men who enjoy playing video games, the medium is by no means enjoyed only by them. All sorts of people play video games on gaming consoles, personal computers or smartphones. In short, video games cater to people belonging to all kinds of demographics and that is enough reason to do social research on video games.

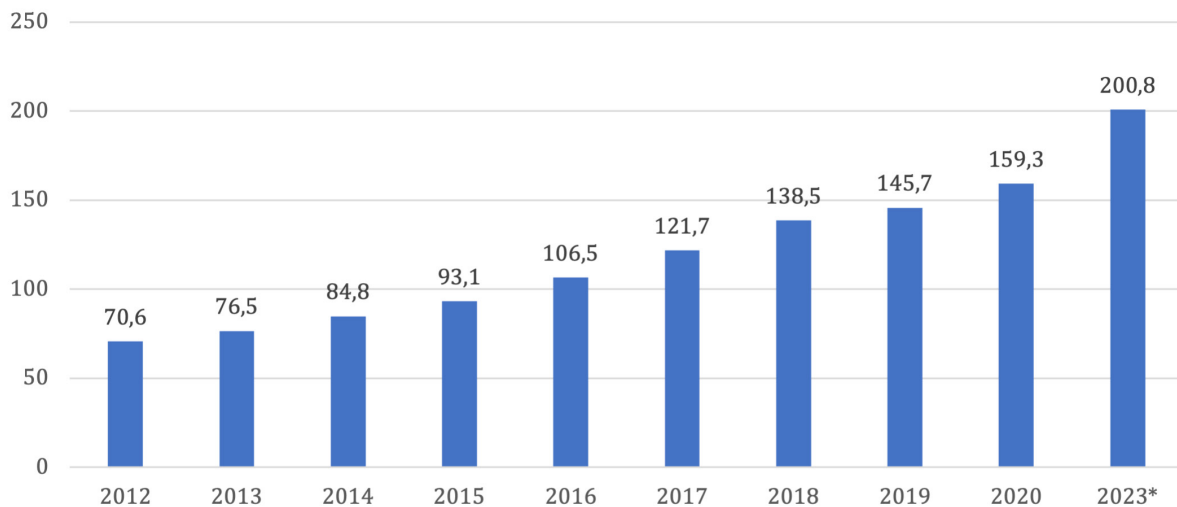
It is a well-known fact that phenomena that are deemed to not hold one or some of economic, political, cultural, social or mediatic value often tend to be neglected in social sciences. Ironically enough, video games are a fruitful field of study in all those areas—they constitute a huge economic sector, they are often political discourse material and there are video games that contain political references, they operate in conveying cultural codes (mostly of the Western world) and they are a matter of discussion both as socialization agents and as media with the functionality of interactivity.

Even though they are still not that many in number today, studies on video games are not non-existent. The study of video games from a sociological perspective often falls under the subfield of cultural studies known as ludology. This is a field which focuses on games, the players that play them and the discourses related to games. As a field

studying not only video games, but all kinds of games, ludology draws on such diverse disciplines as anthropology, sociology and psychology. Crawford specifically mentions that some sociologists have provided significant insight into video games and the culture surrounding them, but that it is not enough and the potential contribution of the field to video games is still an underdeveloped area (Crawford, 2012, p. 5). Corliss (2011, p. 5) makes the point that social scientists researching video games have focused mostly on massively multiplayer online (MMO) games. This genre of video games is centered around the idea that players should cooperate against artificial intelligence or other players. Grouping of this kind allows for unique human interactions. While it might not seem that the players of MMO games do something more than what a basketball player does, that is, act as part of a team in order to defeat the opposing one, the platform on which all the community behavior is exhibited is a virtual one that influences the ways of thinking and the attitudes of all parties involved. This is why eSports need totally different methods of social analysis than traditional sports—the inclusion of a medium is a “game-changer” as the McLuhanian approach asserts.

Then, the academic study of the medium, in and of itself, proves to be socially important. When it comes to the economic importance of the sector, it is safe to say that video gaming is not where it was when it first emerged as an industry. From gaming equipment to gaming-related broadcasting and from eSports events to video games themselves, the video game industry has developed at a very fast pace. Table 1 shows video game market value worldwide between 2012 and 2023:

Table 1. Video Game Market Value Worldwide from 2012 to 2023 (in Billion U.S. Dollars)



*Forecast

Source: (statista, 2021).

Starting off at 70,6 billion U.S. dollars in 2012, the table shows an estimate of 200,8 billion U.S. dollars by 2023 for the video game market. This makes the industry one of the biggest submarkets in the media sector. In fact, eSports alone constitute a big market with top eSports games such as League of Legends (LoL), Call of Duty, Defense of the Ancients 2 (DotA 2), Fortnite generating an ample amount of money. For example, LoL offered competitive gamers a prize pool of 4,596,591 U.S. dollars in 2017 and by 2018, the prize pool of the LoL World Championships totaled 6,450,000,00 U.S. dollars. On the other hand, Fortnite offered a prize pool of 100,000,000 U.S. dollars in its first year of the competitive scene. By comparison, the biggest prize pool witnessed in a tennis

competition was 53,000,000 U.S. dollars at the 2018 U.S. Open Prize (27Group, 2019), the former generating almost twice the amount generated by the latter. All these data point to one simple fact: video games hold both social and economic significance and warrant a thorough critical study.

Looking at Video Games through the Critical Theory Lens

When Horkheimer was appointed as the director of the Institute of Social Research, which served as the institutional foundation for the Frankfurt School, in 1930 and thinkers such as Marcuse and Adorno became members in 1932 and 1938, respectively, critical theory started to take shape (Bottomore, 2003, pp. 11-13). It was not until the 1970s that the video game industry gained significant commercial value, with the first video game ever, Pong, being released in 1972. So successful was the game, it generated a lot of clones and eventually led to a crash in 1977. In the 1980s, the video game industry reached a new peak in popularity based on arcades and home consoles. The 1990s saw the decline of the arcade culture and the rise of home consoles and with the 2000s, online gaming gradually became the norm rather than the exception, forming a network of gamers covering the whole world.

It is clear, then, that the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School were either dead or they were simply not contributing to the fundamental principles of the theory anymore. In any case, critical theory did not meet the most popular times of video games, but the theory itself, being related to the impact of mass media in general, is applicable to video games as popular culture products. In fact, it would not be a hyperbole to say that some arguments found in critical theory are more valid for the video games of today than for the likes of the television and radio programs of when critical theory was established.

First of all, as the go-to pastime of many people, video games provide an easy pleasure. Gaming platforms such as Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo consoles and PC as well as smartphones and gaming-related subscription services such as EA Play, PlayStation Plus, Xbox Game Pass make video games much more accessible today than they have ever been. According to statista (2020), as of 2021, there are 2,81 billion active video gamers around the world and it is expected to rise to 2,95 billion in 2022 and to 3,07 billion in 2023. What this means is that increasing numbers of people are getting "exposed" to a medium that shows fictional worlds, diverting attention away from the real world's problems. While it is true that there are video games that focus on real-life problems such as criminal organizations, drug dealers, corrupt politicians, pandemics, terminal diseases, climate change and, paradoxically enough, dangers of digitization, most video game developers today seem to be of the opinion that people play video games to escape the problems of the real world and thus provide narratives or gameplay mechanics that make a game easy to get into.

The problem does not end here. Although video game developers, like any other media producers, have always concerned themselves with how well their games sold on the market, the newer-generation games seem to be more welcoming towards new buyers than ever. The casual- or newcomer-friendly policies in newer video games are acknowledged in various websites related to gaming. For example, a Poll of the Day on GameFAQs asked gamers the question "Do you think today's video games are easier or harder than they used to be?" 10,075 people answered the poll and out of them, 6,692 (66,42%) answered "Easier - They're now designed for more casual users", with only 100 (0,99%) answering "Much harder - Most new games are too tough for me" (GameFAQs,

2021). Making video games easier to pick up usually detracts from their more serious tone and turns them into a medium preferred to have fun and not much else while doing it. Another Poll of the Day on GameFAQs asked “Why do you play video games?” and out of the 10,276 people that voted, 6,572 (63,95%) answered “It’s a fun way to pass the time”, while the second highest option, “I use them to relieve stress”, was chosen by 1,758 (17,11%) respondents (GameFAQs, 2018). By extension, video games could be said to not only provide an easy pleasure to the masses, but also create fantasy worlds that are more enjoyable, colorful and all-accepting but less challenging than the real world where all kinds of problems may arise and incommode people.¹ With video games, people escape from reality and non-fiction to fantasy and fiction in exactly the same way that the critical theorists claimed the media operates.

It should be noted that, with video games catering more to casual gamers rather than professional (or “serious”) gamers, we are presented with a dichotomy similar to that of high culture versus low culture. As it stands, professional gamers are more involved in the game that they are playing and invest more in it. They are also more familiar with the intricacies of the game they are playing, very much like the consumers of high culture. Casual gamers, on the other hand, look for a simple way of deriving pleasure from video games and they need not involve themselves in the games they are playing. This is in line with the consumers of low culture. With the video games of today catering more to casual gamers than ever before, it is possible to deduce that the video game community is part of low culture as opposed to high culture. However, this would probably still be the case even if video games catered solely to professional gamers due to the mass appeal of the medium and because it would still be drawing the curtain over real-life problems. The point here is that casual-friendly games further cement the low culture status of video games.



**If you just play mobile games
you are not a gamer.**

Figure 1. The high culture versus low culture dichotomy is now a reality of the video game community.

Source: (reddit, 2018).

The Frankfurt School's critical theory is best known for its critique of the entertainment industry in Germany and the USA. The theorists were asserting that "the ultimate truth" was being concealed by the entertainment industry. Horkheimer states

Likes and dislikes that under mass culture have become meaningless are either relegated under the head of amusements, leisure-time activities, social contacts, et cetera, or left to die out gradually. . . . The idea of the hobby, of a 'good time,' or 'fun,' expresses no regret whatsoever for the vanishing of objective reason and the stripping from reality of any inherent 'sense.' The person who indulges in a hobby does not even make believe that it has any relation to ultimate truth (Horkheimer, 2004, p. 26).

It could be understood from Horkheimer's statement that the Frankfurt School's take on mass communication and art is more about what they should be than what they are. For them, the status quo was important insofar as it served as a reference point for what was wrong and censurable with the culture industry and what could be a better, thought-provoking alternative.

Television is an important constituent of the entertainment industry and it was a major point of criticism for the Frankfurt School. However, a television program might be both entertaining and informative. In this context, one might watch a television series to amuse oneself or one might watch a documentary to educate oneself. The same is true for radio programs or a work of art. When it comes to video games, however, things start getting a bit more complex. Indeed, video games might be both entertaining and informative at the same time; they might even be used as an entertaining way to get informed about something—about science, for example. However, the underlying motivations behind consuming a television or radio program or a work of art as opposed to a video game seem to be different. Television and radio might serve the function of catching up with the real/outside world and art could be used to view the state of politics through satirical lenses. The primary driving factor behind playing a video game, however, is to get entertained. It is just an added bonus if a video game character happens to be mocking a politician or making remarks on an event that occurred in the real world. Therefore, video games serve as one of the most striking pillars of the entertainment industry and thus the culture industry.

With all that being said, video games draw attention to different political agendas at times and thus present critical tones. One such game is *Life is Strange 2*. The game is said to reflect Trump's America. The protagonists of the game are two Mexican American brothers and they are constantly reminded of their heritage throughout the game. Most of the characters the player meets over the course of the game are in a state of unease. Some of them are "overtly conscious of the color of their skin, their gender or simply their distrust in the American dream" and yet a select few, who happen to be white, are content with the lives they lead (Martens, 2020). There are other video games that deal with the ontology of war, freedom of speech, armed resistance, revolution, elections etc. just to name a few political issues. However, politics in video games is often met with a reaction of discontent from gamers. It often leads to debate. For example, the term "social justice warrior" ("SJW") is used pejoratively on gaming forums against real people and video game characters that supposedly promote socially progressive and liberal political views.

Another point to be made is the underlying uniformity of video games as commodities produced in the culture industry. Even though there are many different genres of video games,² it would not be wrong to assert that they are becoming increasingly standardized,

formulaic and repetitive both in terms of gameplay mechanics implemented and narratives told. It would help to remember Adorno's remarks,

If one seeks to find out who 'likes' a commercial piece, one cannot avoid the suspicion that liking and disliking are inappropriate to the situation, even if the person questioned clothes his reactions in those words. The familiarity of the piece is a surrogate for the quality ascribed to it. To like it is almost the same thing as to recognize it (Adorno, 1991, p. 30).

Even though Adorno was mainly talking about music, his remarks can also be applied to video games. As the primary goal of producing a commodity in the culture industry is for it to be profitable and easily-consumable, the reason why video game companies would not prefer taking risks becomes understandable. Many video games appear to be clones churned out of a prototype that laid the basics of that genre. One could think of the FIFA video games. Every year, a new FIFA game gets released with very little changed from the previous year.³ The same is true for first person shooter (FPS) games. The striking point is that these games usually sell out no matter how miniscule the changes are. In this respect, more often than not, consumers of these video games buy these commodities without any critical thought process involved before, during or after the buying process. If the consumers find something "familiar" in their games, they tend to like these products and purchase them. This is what the culture industry wants: consumers who buy the produced commodities with no questions being asked. Adorno also makes the point that the consumers of the culture industry are becoming more and more accepting of it, which is consistent with the case of gamers supporting incomplete or repetitive games/game series generally referred to as "video game cash grabs":

The phrase, the world wants to be deceived, has become truer than had ever been intended. People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them. They force their eyes shut and voice approval, in a kind of self-loathing, for what is meted out to them, knowing fully the purpose for which it is manufactured (Adorno, 1991, p. 103).

In conclusion, the culture produced by the culture industry is designed in such a way that the masses are rendered unsuspecting and apathetic by this repetition process. To wrap up in Marcuse's words,

Characteristic is the permanent repetition: the same commercial with the same text or picture broadcast or televised again and again; the same phrases and clichés poured out by the purveyors and makers of information again and again; the same programs and platforms professed by the politicians again and again (Marcuse, 2009, p. 201).

Video games differ from most other forms of media with regard to their interactive aspect and this could be interpreted in two distinct ways by the Frankfurt School. For Adorno, the commodities produced in the culture industry do not require the consumer to have any active interpretative role. What is expected of them is to merely buy the commodities. Therefore, a passive and homogenized audience is both created and expected by the culture industry. A gamer has to follow what is happening on the screen in order to interact with the video game by means of a controller. In this sense of the word, the gamer is not a passive recipient of the medium and is, or needs to be, actively involved in the happenings of the video game. On the other hand, this interactive aspect of video games could be stated to enhance all the problems associated with them. Firstly, Adorno's claim that a product of the culture industry prescribes every reaction holds true for video games, as even in the games where the story is tailored by the choices made by the player, it is impossible to make a choice that was not programmed into the game by

the developers. Secondly, since the fact that audiences could be rendered inactive by a media product over which they have no control is deemed to be dangerous by the critical theorists, there is no reason to believe that a “false sense of control” would be any less dangerous. Gamers control programmed characters in video games, immerse themselves in fictional worlds and by doing so, “disconnect” from the real world. Today’s technology even lets gamers get into virtual realities through virtual-reality headsets and focus entirely on the digitized worlds created for them. This is akin to Adorno’s discussion on the dissipation of the borders between culture and practical life:

The commercial character of culture causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear. Aesthetic semblance turns into the sheen which commercial advertising lends to the commodities which absorb it in turn. But that moment of independence which philosophy specifically grasped under the idea of aesthetic semblance is lost in the process. On all sides the borderline between culture and empirical reality becomes more and more indistinct (Adorno, 1991, p. 61).

In this respect, empirical reality is absorbed into the manufactured culture. In the case of video games, empirical reality is absorbed into virtual reality, distorting the video gamer’s ability to differentiate between what is real and what is fantasy.

Last but not least, while Adorno asserted that the word “industry” in “culture industry” should not be taken too literally, he did not refrain from pointing to its technical aspect, as noted before. In this sense, the culture industry is a factory-like system that produces standardized cultural products with an agenda of their own. This analogy is more valid for video games than the likes of radio programs, because video games are essentially digital media encased in physical cases. Although it is possible to obtain video games digitally rather than physically, physical purchases are still widely preferred by gamers both because the physical versions of video games decrease in price rather quickly and because they could be traded in or sold after being completed. Furthermore, video games are played on mass-produced devices which are sometimes hard to find. For example, Sony’s newest console, PlayStation 5, is out of stock all over the world and the company expects the shortage to continue throughout 2022 (Ganti, 2021). According to the chief financial officer of PlayStation 5, Hiroki Totoki, the shortage of semiconductors is one factor in why the console is not easy to get ahold of and they might consider changing its design in order to be able to produce more (wccfttech, 2021). The video game industry operates very much like an industry that mass produces commodities and distributes them with the aim of creating consumers and profiting in doing so.

Conclusion

The video game industry is ever-growing. It is an inseparable part of the entertainment industry in late capitalist societies. However, until very recently, video games have not really been regarded as a medium with distinctive qualities and as a result, often neglected in academic studies. The medium has some particular aspects to it that demand a different approach than most other media. The Frankfurt School’s critical theory, while it is quite applicable to video games as products of the culture industry, did not take them into account, as the theorists of the School were active at a time when the video game industry was not integrated into capitalism as it is today.

The purpose of this paper was to analyze video games as products of the culture industry and the video games industry as a field that manifests itself as a salient sector in late capital societies. As primarily a medium produced in Western culture and as a highly-

prominent commodity of an entertainment system that puts profit at the forefront of its creation process, video games would most likely have been criticized had they been around when theorists like Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse were putting forward their arguments.

While lately the video game industry seems to have been conforming more to a standardized format, video games do not constitute a homogeneous medium. Therefore, although the video game industry as a whole would probably disappoint the critical theorists, there is a silver lining. Video games can and do contain some criticism of the modern society. For example, the lyrics of the song "The War Still Rages Within" from the 2013 video game *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* is thought by many fans to make valid criticisms of modern capitalist society:

Looking down on the cars on the highway, Stream of tail lights, Everybody advancing together, to so willingly sacrifice rights, When people accept they're cogs in the system, Give up free will, conform, Individual pieces of dust swirl together, Become a full storm, . . . Looking down on the burgeoning city, The skyscrapers rise, Even men with the greatest intentions, Start believing in their own lies, We can borrow from the future, But eventually someone's got to pay, The only way out of the cycle, is to strike out and pave your own way!

However, parallels could be drawn between the societal structure in the age critical theory was established and the video games that criticize the system. After all, the critical theorists, who were a handful of theorists in comparison to the many people content with or oblivious to the state of the mass media and society, were not only living in a society where the entertainment sector was big enough to cover up the happenings of the real world, they were actually shaped and deeply impacted by it. The same could be said about the video games criticizing the status quo: they are produced in a world where the entertainment sector's grip is tighter than ever before and are few in number when compared to the video games that put surplus value above anything else.

Notes

1 There are indeed critical, negative and dark video games, but they hardly criticize real people or real-world events. The plot of a video game might be dark and depressing, but all still happens within the fantasy world created by the developers, rarely referencing real life.

2 According to Pavlovic (2020), there are at least 10 genres of video games and these are sandbox, real-time strategy (RTS), shooters (FPS and TPS), multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA), role-playing (RPG, ARPG and more), simulation and sports, puzzlers and party games, action-adventure, survival and horror and platformer. However, it should be noted that the critical theorists assumed an approach similar to that of McLuhan, since they opted to focus generally on a medium (i.e. television) and its imagery (Adorno, 1991, p. 158) rather than specific media products.

3 In the case of the games that are not released annually, producers might opt for the seasonal approach in which the game receives new content with each season that usually lasts a year.

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Frankfurt Okulu'nun Eleştirel Teorisi ve Popüler Kültür Ürünleri Olarak Bilgisayar Oyunlarının Bir Eleştirisi

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Frankfurt Okulu, Chicago Okulu ile birlikte sosyolojideki en önemli iki düşünce ekolünden biridir. Okul, kitle iletişim araçlarının etkilerini incelemek üzere bir çerçeve sağlamıştır. Nitekim, Okul'un teorisyenleri ilk defa medyaya sistematik olarak eleştirel bir gözle bakmakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda medya araştırmalarında ideolojiyi bir araştırma nesnesi olarak ele almışlardır.

Günümüzde Frankfurt Okulu eleştirel teori ile ilişkilendirilmektedir. Okul'un eleştirisinin ana odak noktasını toplum ve kültür, daha özelden ise kitle iletişim araçları oluşturmaktadır. Okul'un önde gelen iki üyesi Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno ve Max Horkheimer, 1947'de yayımlanan *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Aydınlanmanın Diyalektiği) adlı kitaplarında "kültür endüstrisi" terimini kullanmışlar, fabrikayı çağrıştıran bir sistem ile popüler kültür ürünleri arasında benzeşim kurmuşlardır. Bu teorisyenlere göre, üretilen "kültür"; filmler, radyo programları, dergiler vb. aracılığıyla kitleleri kayıtsızlığa sürükleyen bir araç işlevi görmekte ve bunun sonucunda kapitalist statüko korunmaktaydı.

Frankfurt Okulu'nun eleştirel teorisinin medya ve iletişim çalışmalarına büyük katkı sağladığına şüphe yoktur. Aslına bakılacak olursa, bugün medyayı eleştirmek için kullandığımız ifadelerin çoğu, Frankfurt Okulu'nun öne sürdüğü fikirler etrafında şekillenmiştir. Öte yandan, Frankfurt Okulu'nun eleştirel teorisyenleri, bilgisayar oyunlarının en popüler zamanlarında ya ölmüşlerdi ya da artık teorisinin temel ilkelerine katkıda bulunmuyorlardı. Bu çalışmanın amacı, eleştirel teorisinin en parlak döneminde yaygın olmayan bir medya türü olan bilgisayar oyunlarını, teorisinin temel ilkeleri üzerinden analiz etmektir. Mevcut çalışma, Adorno ve Horkheimer döneminde kültür endüstrisi ürünleriyle ilgili olarak ileri sürülen iddiaların, teorisinin ortaya atılmasından çok sonra yaygınlığı artan bilgisayar oyunları için de geçerli olduğu fikri etrafında şekillenmiştir. Bu bağlamda, bilgisayar oyunlarının üretim süreçleri ve içerikleri ile bu oyunların tüketimindeki oyuncu motivasyonları eleştirel teori merceğinden analiz edilmeye çalışılmıştır.

Bilgisayar oyunları, uzunca bir süre toplumsal önemi olmayan materyaller olarak kabul görmüş ve sosyal bilimlerden ihmal edilmiştir. Bilgisayar oyunları herhangi bir sosyal araştırma için veri olarak kullanıldığında ise odak noktasının genellikle bu medya türünün gençler üzerindeki olumsuz etkileri olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Bilgisayar oyunlarının toplumsal etkilerine odaklanan ilk çalışmalarda artan saldırganlık, okul başarısının azalması ve dikkat eksikliği gibi olumsuz sonuçlara ulaşılmıştır. Diğer yandan, bazı araştırmalar bilgisayar oyunlarının olumlu yönleri olabileceğine de dikkat çekmiştir. Örneğin, kimi araştırmalarda oyuncunun bir bilgisayar oyununda saldırgan eylemleri dijital olarak gerçekleştirmesinin, onun bunları gerçek hayatta çok sık yapmamasına yol açabileceği ortaya konmuştur. Günümüze gelindiğinde ise hem ekonomik hem de toplumsal önemi artan bilgisayar oyunlarının daha farklı açılardan da incelenmeye başlanmasının gerektiği anlaşılmaktadır.

Frankfurt Okulu'nun temel iddialarının bilgisayar oyunları çerçevesinde tartışıldığı bu çalışma da alanyazındaki bir eksiği kapatmaktadır. İlk olarak, bilgisayar oyunlarının başta gençler olmak üzere birçok farklı grubun vazgeçilmez eğlence aracı olarak basit zevkler sağladığı anlaşılmaktadır. Sony, Microsoft ve Nintendo konsolları gibi oyun platformlarının yanı sıra akıllı telefonlar ve EA Play, PlayStation Plus, Xbox Game Pass gibi oyunla ilgili abonelik hizmetleri, bilgisayar oyunlarını bugün hiç olmadığı kadar erişilebilir bir hâle getirmiştir. Bugün çoğu bilgisayar oyunu geliştiricisi, insanların gerçek dünyanın sorunlarından kaçmak için bilgisayar oyunu oynadıkları ve bu yüzden bir oyuna başlamayı kolaylaştıran anlatılar veya oyun mekanikleri ortaya koymaları gerektiği anlayışındadır. Son çıkan bilgisayar oyunlarındaki yeni oyuncu dostu politikalar, GameFAQs gibi oyunlarla ilgili internet sitelerinde genel kabul görmektedir.

Bunun yanı sıra, profesyonel (veya "ciddi") oyunculardan ziyade sıradan oyunculara hitap eden bilgisayar oyunları, "yüksek kültüre karşı düşük kültür"e benzer bir dikotomi de ortaya çıkmaktadır. Profesyonel oyuncular oynadıkları oyuna daha fazla dâhil olmakta ve oyuna daha fazla yatırım yapmaktadır. Söz konusu oyuncular, tıpkı yüksek kültür tüketicileri gibi, oynadıkları oyunun inceliklerine daha aşinadırlar. Sıradan oyuncular ise genelde bilgisayar oyunlarından zevk almanın basit bir yolunu aramaktadırlar ve oynadıkları oyunlara kendilerini dâhil etmek zorunda kalmazlar. Bu durum, düşük kültür tüketicileriyle benzer bir tüketim örüntüsüne işaret etmektedir. Günümüzün bilgisayar oyunlarının sıradan oyunculara her zamankinden daha fazla hitap etmesiyle, bilgisayar oyun camiasının yüksek kültürün aksine düşük kültürün bir parçası olduğu sonucuna varmak mümkün görünmektedir.

Eleştirel teori Almanya ve ABD'deki eğlence endüstrisine yönelik eleştirisiyle ön plana çıkmaktadır. Frankfurt Okulu'nun kitle iletişimine ve sanata bakışı, bunların ne olduklarından çok, ne olmaları gerektiğiyle ilgilidir. Bir televizyon programı hem eğlenceli hem de bilgilendirici olabilir. Bu bağlamda insan kendini eğlendirmek için bir televizyon dizisi izleyebilir ya da kendini eğitmek için bir belgesel izleyebilir. Aynı şey radyo programları veya bir sanat eseri için de geçerlidir. Diğer yandan, bilgisayar oyunları söz konusu olduğunda durum daha karmaşık bir hâl almaktadır. Bilgisayar oyunları aynı anda hem eğlendirici hem de bilgilendirici olabilir; hatta bir şey hakkında (örneğin bilim hakkında) bilgi edinmenin eğlenceli bir yolu olarak da kullanılabilirler. Ancak bir bilgisayar oyununun aksine bir televizyon veya radyo programını veya bir sanat eserini tüketmenin altında yatan motivasyonlar farklı görünmektedir. Televizyon ve radyo, tüketicisine gerçek/dış dünyayı yakalama imkânı sağlayabilirken sanat da siyasi gündeme eleştirel gözle bakma fırsatı tanıyabilir. Ancak bilgisayar oyunu oynamanın arkasındaki birincil itici faktör eğlenmektir. Bu nedenle, bilgisayar oyunlarının günümüz eğlence sektörünün ve dolayısıyla kültür endüstrisinin en çarpıcı ayaklarından biri olarak işlev gösterdiği söylenebilir.

Üzerinde durulması gereken bir diğer nokta da, kültür endüstrisinde üretilen metalar olarak bilgisayar oyunlarının tekdüzeliğidir. Bilgisayar oyunlarının pek çok farklı türü olsa da gerek oynanış mekanikleri gerekse işlenen anlatılar açısından oyunların giderek standartlaştığını, kalıplaşmış ve tekrarlayıcı hâle geldiğini söylemek yanlış olmayacaktır. Ayrıca, bilgisayar oyunları, interaktif olmaları bakımından diğer medya biçimlerinden farklıdır ve bu, Frankfurt Okulu tarafından iki farklı şekilde yorumlanabilir. Adorno'ya göre kültür endüstrisinde üretilen metalar, tüketicinin herhangi bir aktif yorumlayıcı role sahip olmasını gerektirmez. Kendilerinden beklenen sadece bu metaları satın almalarıdır. Bu nedenle, kültür endüstrisi tarafından hem pasif hem de homojenleştirilmiş bir

tüketici kitlesi yaratılmaktadır. Bir oyuncunun, bir kontrolör aracılığıyla video oyunuya etkileşime girebilmesi için ekranda neler olduğunu takip etmesi gerekir. Bu açıdan bakıldığında oyuncu, pasif bir alıcı değildir ve bilgisayar oyununun olaylarına aktif olarak dâhil olur. Öte yandan, bilgisayar oyunlarının bu interaktif yanının, yine bu oyunlarla ilgili tüm sorunları ileriye taşıdığı söylenebilir. İzleyicilerin üzerinde kontrolleri olmayan bir medya ürünü tarafından etkisiz hâle getirilebileceği gerçeği Frankfurt Okulu tarafından tehlikeli kabul edilmektedir. Öte yandan, “bir şeyi kontrol ediyormuş” yanılgısının daha çok tehlikeli olabileceğini söylememek için ortada hiçbir neden yoktur. Oyuncular, bilgisayar oyunlarında programlanmış karakterleri kontrol ederlerken kendilerini kurgusal dünyalara kaptırıp gerçek dünyayla olan “bağlantılarını koparabilirler”. Günümüz teknolojisi, oyuncuların sanal gerçeklik başlıkları aracılığıyla sanal dünyalara tam anlamıyla girip tamamen bu dünyalara odaklanmalarına dahi imkân tanımakta, bu da gerçeklikten kopuşun ne denli hızlı ve yaygın olabileceğine işaret etmektedir. Adorno'nun bakış açısından bilgisayar oyunları ile bağlantılı bu gibi süreçlerin, kitleleri modern kapitalist toplumun gerçek sorunlarından uzaklaştırmak üzere rol oynadığı söylenebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İletişim Çalışmaları, Frankfurt Okulu, Eleştirel Teori, Kültür Endüstrisi, Bilgisayar Oyunları, Popüler Kültür Ürünleri.

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