

Time to Play: The Rationalization of Leisure Time

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how rationalization logic and rationalization processes influence digital gaming by looking at how players value and manage the time they spend on games. The study is framed in a discussion of leisure time, critical theories of computation and rationalization theory. Qualitative interview data is used in an inductive and phenomenology inspired approach.

The results show two frames of understanding of gaming. First, games are perceived as media products and playing as a waste of time. Secondly, digital gaming is a hobby, a social activity highly valued within the framework of a rational time economy. We conclude that even though we are seeing a rationalization of leisure time in gaming, that rationalization process must be understood in the context of individualization within the new network society. This means that players are involved in a 'rational individualization' process where their management of leisure time and gaming activities are part of an ongoing identity project.

Keywords

Time usage, digital gaming, rationalization, leisure, play

1. INTRODUCTION

An increasingly common and popular leisure activity in contemporary culture is digital gaming, games played on a monitor [1]. Numbers estimate that over 50% of people in the West play some sort of computer or console game [2]. Furthermore, gaming as an activity has since the 1990's gone through several changes, inter alia from narrow subculture to mainstream [3], and today is aimed at far wider audiences than in previous decades [2].

Playing computer games take up a significant part of gamers' leisure time. Online survey data (n=2982) show that the average MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) player spends 22 hours per week on the game, with no significant difference between males and females and very small variations across age groups [4]. Gaming is often considered a time-consuming activity; in an interview study of young World of

Warcraft (WoW) players, time was seen as a prominent issue, both for gamers and for their relationship with parents, who perceive that online gaming devours far too much time [5].

Play has been defined by Huizinga [6] as a free activity; we are free to play and play can never be forced upon us or it stops being play. As a leisure activity, play in general [6] and digital gaming in particular is thought of as a pastime pursued for its own sake [7]. Studies have shown that we play computer games because they are fun [8]. The ideas that play is free, done for its own sake and as an escape from the routines of productive life are some of the assumptions underlying the definitions of play offered by both Huizinga [6] and Caillois [9]. This demarcation as mere entertainment and unproductive activity with no relation to working life has colored the general ideas we hold about digital games.

By arguing that playing computer games cannot always simply be equated with fun or meaningless play (see e.g. [10]) we challenge this view. We suggest instead that gaming can be seen as rational, productive and highly affected by ideas of effective usage of time, which we conceptualize as 'rational time economy'. Although digital games can of course be played for fun, amusement and as escape from everyday life, we show that this idea cannot be generalized to all aspects of digital gaming. As argued by Malaby [10], the idea that play is safe, fun and separate from everyday life does not hold as an intrinsic and universal feature of games when they are studied empirically. This has been confirmed by a number of studies. For instance in a study about gold farmers Dibbell [11] argues that gold farming is an activity which is highly productive, instrumental and monotonous and we can see similarities to the Taylorist [12] organization of work. In a study of Everquest Taylor [13] shows how power gamers focus on efficiency and instrumentality, implying a rational and goal oriented style of play even when its function is amusement. So that while gold farmers entertain the productive function of gaming, power gamers demonstrate a productive play style. The power gamers in Taylor's study attempt to make the most of their time in the game and so undertake actions to produce efficient reward patterns. Yee [14] points to the blurring of play and work, in that the aspect of grinding—repetitive game play—shares some characteristics with productive work and that MMO-players often consider part of their game play as work. The boundaries between play and work also blur in professional gaming [15]. Further, playing online games has been shown to be inseparable from larger values and ideas of society and culture [16]. In two studies of the online game *URU: Age beyond Myst*, Pearce [7; 17] notes

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that online games as constructive, creative production for its own sake is part of game play activities.

In this paper we explore how rationalization logic and rationalization processes structure computer game playing by looking at how players, young and adult, value, think of and use their time spent on computer games. The study is framed within a discussion of the transformation of time and space in late modernity [18] along with leisure time theory and critical theories of computation. Gaming in this study is seen as an activity that we engage in on our free time—with others or alone. This view of gaming follows the informants' own definition of their activity. In the groups studied, gaming is mainly seen as a hobby, a leisure-activity. Further studies should look at gaming in other contexts, e.g. educational or professional, where gaming is done for a clear purpose other than entertainment.

2. METHOD

In this study we use an inductive approach [19] inspired by phenomenology [20]. This means that we did not start from a predefined theoretical assumption—a theory or hypothesis against which to test the empirical material [19]. Instead we let the empirical material 'speak to us', that is, allowing the data to suggest relevant ideas, concepts and theories; here foremost the conflict in informants' valuing of their free time. Based on our findings, we then formulated a set of research questions, a theoretical framework and the construction of themes. In other words, the life world of the informants has been a shaping factor in the results. From this first order of construction [21], through a thematic qualitative analysis, we interpreted the results in a second order of construction [21]. The analytical categories that emerged from the analysis correspond to the headlines in the result section. Below we discuss the rationalization of computer gaming and leisure time based on two empirical data gatherings. One, a number of interviews with young people in a game café in Stockholm taking place in 2007 and 2011 (part of a larger field study, $n=60$ persons; see [22]), which included 8 interviews covering 9 persons that specifically brought up the issue of time usage. Two, an (individual as well as focus group) interview study with 33 adult Swedish gamers on the topic of gaming and social gaming, performed in 2009-2011 (see [23]), all of which have been included in the structured thematic analysis. All the interviewees considered themselves to be 'gamers'; playing digital games was an important part of how they spent their leisure time and they played all sorts of digital games.

3. LEISURE

Leisure, as a concept, is a relatively new phenomenon. As work time decreased at the beginning of the last century, workers gradually gained more free time, making the concept of leisure important [24]. Leisure time activity is voluntary and engaged in for its own sake as well as for social and personal reasons [25]. Leisure is 'own time' that tends to be synonymous with play time (e.g. [24]), that is, activities that are relaxing and recreational in contrast to the demands of more formal socializing and the pressure of productive work.

Kelly argues that we can rank leisure activities on a scale where interaction with intimates comes first, followed by identity creation and then the experience itself. We participate in leisure activities to interact with family and friends and this interaction is one of our main goals. Kelly further states: "In general, social satisfaction, rest and relaxation, and engagement with experience or mastery of an activity, were all found to be significant

measures of leisure." [25: 4]. According to Stebbins [26], leisure can take on different forms, levels of intensity and duration across contexts. Thus, leisure can range from casual, fleeting engagements, to intensive short-term projects, to more serious lifetime commitments that require a great deal of time, money, and energy. But individuals in late modern [18] society only have a certain amount of time available for leisure activities [27]. While free time has historically been something reserved for the affluent classes, today leisure time is something we take for granted, one of the 'new' aspects of modern society, and filling it with meaningful activities is a goal in itself. In this context digital games have in the last 20 years come to play a prominent role in the leisure time of many people, both young and old [28].

Today, we are seeing a blurring of the boundary between leisure and labor. With the demands for accessibility brought about by modern communication technologies, it is harder today to tell when we are not working, because we now live in a network society [29], constantly connected to one another. The demands to seek new experiences and to spend our free time on meaningful activities have increased [27]. In some contexts the demands on leisure time to serve as an arena for the 'identity project' create stress and since many activities are costly, also create a discrepancy between what we want and what we are able to do [27]. Fuhrer shows that the temporal dimension of leisure is of great importance for our subjective experience of well-being; people worry about lack of time in their everyday life and dream about having more time for quality leisure time with opportunities for social interaction, relaxation and more 'own' time. We live in a rational time economy where the dominating view on time use has productive work as the norm against which other activities are evaluated [27].

3.1 The Rationalization of Leisure

As the blurring between work and leisure advances, the process of managing our leisure time becomes more intimately linked with the concept of rationalization, an intrinsic aspect of modern society; especially in the West [30]. Weber argued that the rational calculation of profit and costs is essential to the modern capitalist enterprise [30], but that increasing rationalization—the most instrumentally efficient way to achieve a goal—could in turn be a threat to individual freedom. In an attempt at modernizing Weber's rationality theory, Ritzer views the McDonald's fast-food chain as the paradigm, where Weber used bureaucracy, and has coined the term McDonaldization. In McDonaldization, contemporary social institutions are rationalized to yield more profit. The McDonald's restaurant model is iconic of this process [31] and points towards a new mode of consumption [32]. Efficiency, quantity over quality, standardization and control are all characteristics of McDonaldization [31]. Goldman and Wilson further define rationalization as: "... the process whereby abstract and formal rules and the dictates of calculability and efficiency come to dominate action." [24: 19].

Robbin and Webster [33] argue that the process of rationalization can be traced to the capitalist work mobilization and Fordism of the twentieth century. They note that technology came to play a core role in creating an internal factory discipline—in particular the automated assembly line of Henry Ford—with Scientific Management and Taylorism as the leading lights. The authors argue that Fordism was not only a factory revolution but a whole way of life. Fordism extended and deepened the process whereby capital imposes its rhythm and tempo upon time and time-

consciousness. “The times of production (work) and reproduction (leisure time) have become increasingly continuous, an integrated time subject to calculation and external time discipline” [33: 113]. They state that time is segmented according to the different tasks of production and reproduction, and are so divided in order to be used productively and intensely. We then get what Fuhrer calls a rational time economy [27].

Rationalization and work have traditionally been seen as the opposite of play [6]. As Goldman and Wilson argue: “The essence of play, its lack of regulation, its disdain for material outcomes, its exaltation in uncertainty, is the antithesis of the work values of a technological world.” [24: 18]. This leaves us with a contradiction where the playing of games seems to be increasing in our society [2], but where we also observe an accelerating process of rationalization of human activities and institutions. This process can be connected to many areas of our social lives and leisure is one of the spheres at risk. The rationalization of leisure is not an unknown phenomenon, as Goldman and Wilson show [24]. As American workers gained leisure time, employers began to fear a detrimental effect on work time and so strived to control workers’ free time by encouraging them to engage in productive leisure time activities.

Grimes and Feenberg [34] see games as sites for social rationality and argue that games have a part in the rationalization process of the modern world, seeing three structures of rationalization: exchange of equivalents; classification and application of rules; and optimization of effort and calculation of results. They propose a ludification theory in two tiers, by looking at the way that games represent a type of rational practice as well as having social aspects as in large scale, organized social interaction structured by the game. They argue that game play operates a social order that enacts certain rationalizing principles in much the same way as in other institutions, e.g. bureaucratization. Grimes and Feenberg [34] do not separate play and games in this sense. Instead, they argue that it is the games and their design that supply the basis for the social rationalization, basically defined by community rules and norms, and state that: “...it is not that social order recapitulates certain features of games, but rather that games have themselves become forms of social order.” ([34: 6, italics in the original].

In a similar vein, but analyzing computation rather than games, which is a method, a metaphor and an organizing frame, Columbia [35] argues that the computer is a proxy for an idealized form of rationalism. Computation is intimately linked with the rationalist theory of mind. This may explain the strength of computation’s influence in the world. He believes that the rationalist vision can be mutated into a full articulation of human society.

The antagonism between rationality and play is here in question, also that the ideal version of play is an inherent nature of digital games. While Grimes and Feenberg [34] and Columbia [35] base their argumentation on games and computers and show how the usage of these technologies evolves into an increasingly rational activity, this study looks at how players experience and value the activity of and time spent on playing digital games and how they use concepts from rationalization to defend their leisure gaming. Below we will connect their experiences and values to the concept of a rational time economy, where the process of rationalization is operationalized from the theories mentioned above, as when abstract and formal rules as well as ideas about

calculability and efficiency dominate action, and quantity over quality is promoted as well as standardization of control mechanisms. Rationalization is here defined as a process striving for an efficient way of organizing action with focus on the optimization of effort.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The Tension between Rational Time Use and Play

The analysis shows that for the informants there is tension between a rational use of time and playing digital games. Gottfrid (21years of age), with an in-depth interest in games both as a player and as a university student of game-programming, expresses this conflict in the following dialogue. The researcher encountered him and his classmate, 20-year-old Anders, playing WoW between classes at a game café in Stockholm in 2007.

Researcher: Do you come to game cafés often?

Gottfrid: It happened more before.

Researcher: Yes?

Anders: We used to be here all the time.

Gottfrid: Now it’s less often. We don’t have as much time as we used to. We don’t have the same needs either. Now we have things that we prioritize, such as university. When we were younger we took our weekly pocket money and came here to play and spent all of our money, so we couldn’t do any other things that week. But it was worth it.

The informants all shared this view of a perceived conflict between work and leisure time, but where the balance often changed with a changing life situation. Moving on from school to university or to a job is often a demarcation line. The young men in the example above say that now they are attending university they neither have the same needs nor the time available to play games. As a result of other obligations, leisure time is shrinking. For the informants in the sample leisure time is often limited due to responsibility for work or studies. In this chosen example, studies are prioritized. On the other hand, the shift in their frequency of going to game cafés is not only a result of their shrinking leisure time but also a result of what they express as not having the same needs. The value of gaming has changed for them. Games are generally perceived as “wasting time” as Helen (18) expresses it; and many informants describe feelings of guilt when spending too much time on gaming.

Gottfrid continues by saying that he initially did not want to get involved in WoW as he felt it would take too much of his leisure time. However, he admits to giving in to social pressure, creating an account and starting to play, since otherwise he would have been left out of discussions and in effect excluded from the local community at school. But he also explains that he feared getting swallowed up by the game.

Gottfrid: I was afraid of getting caught up in the game.

Researcher: But were you?

Gottfrid: Yes. It takes so much of my leisure time. It is a big part of my life now. But as long as I do not choose the computer above my friends it’s ok.

Gottfrid’s fears—common among the informants—can be described as the ‘holding power of games’ (see [36] about the holding power of computers), where once you begin to play you

cannot stop; the game ‘sucks you in’. But the idea of the holding power of games is not specific to the game medium or to computers. It has been described for other media as well, compare TV dependency (expressed in such formulations as “you get square eyes”). The fear of being caught up in the game can be seen as an expression of the rational and instrumental conceptualization of leisure in the informants’ stories. Leisure time is supposed to be used in a rational and effective way and to get out as much as possible from the time put in.

Fuhrer [27] writes that our overly planned working (or school) life puts further demands on our free time to be both relaxing and social, and that social interaction is an important aspect of leisure time. The informants express frustration that playing games takes time from other leisure activities such as going out or being with friends, perceived by the informants as more meaningful activities.

Since digital gaming takes place in a virtual setting, it is loaded with particular meanings connected to the virtual setting alone and gaming is judged by all of the informants as a less important activity than such ‘real’ aspects of life as being with friends or managing school.

Veronika (17): [Playing games] takes so much of your time

Lotta (49): Yes, you should clean up but instead you play.

Time is perceived as a limited resource where there are many things to be done that are more important than gaming. In itself this is true, of course, and even perhaps desired; that people let their free time come second to work or school. However, the question here is not the correct way of spending time but rather that gaming is seen as a danger or a threat to the productive side of life. Due to the perceived holding power of games they are perceived as hazardous and something that can draw you away from more important things that you have to do. In this positioning of play as a danger, play and work present a Cartesian dualism where excessive gaming often is associated with negative effects on the body.

Researcher: Do you feel you get labeled as a gamer?

Frida (19): I think, overweight, sitting and playing all the time, eating pan pizza. But it is only because one guy in my old school was a little overweight and drank cola all the time and gamed so much and didn't go to the bathroom that he began peeing blood, which is why I think this way.

This dramatic story, just one of many of this type told by the informants, whether true or not illustrates how losing control of gaming is associated with losing control of the body resulting in bodily harm, such as obesity or deficient hygiene. We argue that this express an idea of a rational mind losing control over the body, the virtual activity becomes physical. A paradox is created where fun, play and the loss of control over these activities is symbolized by dysfunction in the body—control and rational thinking in opposition to fun and games.

4.2 Motivating Gaming in a Rational Time Economy

Eva (28): (...) on weekdays when you get home from work you're tired and you know that you have to get up early the day after and, like yeah, you don't really get anything from watching TV, or I don't anyway. And then it feels very relevant to sit down in front of the computer.

(...)

Tim (28): You can set goals in a game; it's not real life but you have goals you can achieve. With TV you can't. (...) This is entertainment at the same time as it feels like you're working on improving something, and it's social.

In general the informants in our sample describe gaming as a meaningful activity, as seen in the example above, and thereby justify its place in a temporal economy where leisure time should be spent doing meaningful activities or having meaningful experiences [27]. They argue that gaming is ‘better’ than other activities; goals can be set and achieved. Gaming is furthermore often compared with watching TV, an activity declared as pacifying, whereas game playing is seen as rational, as involving some work and so not a total waste of time. Yet by saying so they do in some way agree that playing to some extent is a waste of time. As Fuhrer [27] shows, in the late-modern moral time economy, the norm is the abstract value-creating work against which other activities are measured.

At the same time, gaming is considered a fun leisure activity which helps you to relax, and the fact that you can play online or co-operatively also makes the activity social.

Helen (18): [Gaming] feels like a waste of time, but it really is fun, much more fun than most other things you do.

All of the informants relate to time issues when talking about their own gaming. When framing gaming they describe an activity which makes them relax and protect them from the stress of their professional lives—how they want more time for gaming, and how gaming offers a retreat from the stress of work or school.

Digital gaming is described as a hobby, focused as such on *doing* and *socializing*, and therefore a ‘good’ way of spending time. Games gain their meaning from contrast with the productive sphere. At the same time, gaming is perceived as a rational and goal fulfilling activity, somewhat elevated in relation to other media such as TV. By interpreting this leisure activity in words and expressions used for activities that are not seen as a waste of time, free time is defended to oneself as well as to others. At the risk of sounding overly dramatic, let us say that informants use rational ideas to defend themselves against demands for rationality even in their leisure time. They play games because it is fun, but the thing at stake is their free time and its disconnection from the rational time economy within which people live most of their lives. Framing digital game playing as a more active hobby and borrowing ideas from the work ethic is a way of resisting the idea of game playing as a waste of time. The gamers’ defense strategy is to infuse the activity with value even if they do so within the rational time economy framework.

4.3 Rational Identity Production; Redefining Nerds

Leisure time is organized by the informants and time planned so that there is space both for being with friends and for playing games. As an example, Adam has organized his game leisure time and his social time in such a way that these two activities do not clash.

Adam (19): I don't play much on weekends because then I hang out with my friends—my sports friends. We hang out and do other things than playing games.

Playing digital games is an activity that can separate the gamer from friends, but it is also a social activity that includes friends.

Tom (21): It's not like we're lazy and just play games and aren't doing other things. It's not like the nerd who's always only gaming. Many people I know have a social life and they work. It's the same for me.

Playing games has been associated with being a nerd—the geek who spends all his (because in the myth it often is a young man) days and nights in front of his computer [36; 37]. Although the stereotypical image of the nerd is a skilled programmer/computer wizard, popular images of computer game nerds are lazy loners who escape real life obligations [38]. Tom's comment can therefore be understood as a way of rationalizing and legitimizing his own game playing within the discourse of the rational time economy by stressing that he indeed is able to have/handle a social life, work *and* play games. Behind his statement lies the extenuating argument that he exercises responsibility and has a healthy relationship to games; that he is in control of his gaming.

During the interviews all of the informants motivate time spent on playing games in relation to engaging in school/employment and social life. It is made clear that time spent on gaming should not take time from other leisure activities and productive time such as school or work.

Tony (19): When the escape urge takes control and you can't handle daily life, such as those nerds who always play, then it becomes too much. Most people that I know are studying, working, have a social life.

The comment above shows that using computer games to escape everyday life, which among many scholars is a core feature of play (e.g. [6]), is seen as something negative. This aspect of gaming is associated with a 'bad' way of structuring life and is associated with the stereotype of the nerd, of one who has somehow lost control.

The discourse on leisure time and play time in relation to work expresses a rational and productive idea about playing computer games. In contrast to Huizinga's [6] idea that play should be free and voluntary, and participated in for its own sake, we show in this study that playing computer games is not always motivated by the enjoyment and fun of playing games alone. When aspects of time and time usage are taken into account, we find that play is rationalized and valued and judged against work. This suggests the inconsistency between leisure and work time that Fuhrer [27] speaks of; where time today is a limited resource and late modernity is partly characterized by an inconsistency between leisure time and work time. In the rational time economy we evaluate gaming against work, which then becomes the baseline to which other activities are compared. By constructing an identity in opposition to the idea of the nerd, who comes to symbolize all the negative aspects of gaming, the informants situate the negative aspects somewhere else, not in their own usage, and claim a position as rational beings in control of their time.

4.4 Killing Time—(Non-)Rational Time Usage

Certain forms of game play, referred to by scholars as 'killing time' [39], are used to plug small gaps or longer stretches of waiting time during the day. Playing games to kill time is a way of avoiding boredom, when there is nothing else to do, and often is done alone.

Ferdinand (19): When you play alone it is different [than playing together with friends]. When you play alone it is just killing time. Like watching TV or something like that.

The informants claim that playing games alone has no other meaning than the purpose of filling a time gap when no other activity can easily be fit in, and still thus becomes time spent more usefully than just doing nothing. Playing games with friends, on the other hand, is seen as a meaningful social activity.

Jonas (24): This is a leisure activity, a hobby. It does not take time from other activities. To say that you play to kill time sounds negative. But for me it doesn't take time from other activities.

Researcher: You mean that it works as a complement to your life and to other activities of your life?

Jonas: Yes.

Games are not supposed to interfere with social life. Spending time face-to-face with friends is seen as useful time, spent on something important that matters. Our time is limited and therefore must be spent well. Nevertheless, small spare-time pockets sometimes occur that modern-day restlessness compels us to fill. Boredom must be avoided at all costs and doing nothing is considered the worst possible waste of time. It can be argued that boredom is certainly a perceived danger in our lives. In the "experience culture" [27] of today we are constantly exposed to things we 'should' do and ideas we 'should' adopt and be guided by. So we can see how gaming is perceived as something positive, something that can give meaning and entertainment to gamers' everyday life as well as something that can be used to 'kill time'.

5. CONCLUSIONS

For Huizinga [6] and Caillois [9] play is not rational and that is its sole point. What permeates this study, however, is the idea of digital gaming as an activity that falls within the rationalization of modern society. We show that even when people play for fun there are rational dimensions to the way they structure and understand their activity. Like most media today, games are there to help us relax and give value to our free time. However, the time spent on computer games is to be used and managed in a rational way. While we cannot generalize our results findings they indicate that gamers handle their game time in a rational way. They focus on efficiency and optimization of effort, clear aspects of rationalization [24; 31; 34]. As they describe and make sense of their activity they argue in terms of rationality—when gaming you *do* something meaningful *and* you are social. They furthermore clearly distinguish gaming from watching TV, which is considered pacifying and a waste of time. By framing their chosen activity in opposition to another medium they increase its perceived value within the rational time economy. As such, leisure is valued and leisure activities given a certain status in our daily life, but judged in accordance with rules governing the rational spending of time.

The conclusions show two frames of interpretation; two conflicting discourses on understanding and of valuing digital gaming. In one, digital games are perceived as a media product similar to TV and playing games as a waste of time and energy or as away to 'kill time'. Yet gaming is seen as a potentially productive practice that needs to be optimized, is efficient and focused on results and governed by rationalization. As can be read in some of the quotes, gamers generally try to get as much as

possible out of their game play in as little time as possible. In the second frame, informants construct digital games as a hobby, borrowing from the positive connotations that the word and the activity entail, and by framing digital gaming as a social activity they protect and argue for it within the framework of the modern rational time economy. To have a hobby is to do something valuable in your free time, to dedicate yourself to something. This can be seen as a resistance strategy even though, as we have shown, this frame still operates within the rational time economy. However, the informants seem to find it difficult to move completely beyond the first frame. The boundary is by no means clear but rather, gamers tend to oscillate back and forth.

As we have seen, the boundary separating work and leisure time is blurring; playing games is judged and valued in relation to work and the use of leisure time in a productive way. To motivate the time spent on games, the informants feel that it is not enough to talk about the pleasure they get from gaming. Spending time on games is seen as good or rational only when it does not take time from other activities. Moreover, it is framed within a discourse of defining a personal identity. The stereotype of the nerd who is always playing is a negative image which individuals must renounce. The ideal player is one that can balance play with work and a social life. Playing 'all the time' is regarded as positive only if you are making a living out of it as a professional gamer, when playing is actually work.

6. DISCUSSION: THE RATIONALIZATION OF LEISURE TIME

Although leisure has been defined as voluntary activities that we engage in it for their own sake as well as for social and personal reasons [25], we have seen that leisure time is not always 'free'. In this study we have seen several examples of how play time is rationalized and used productively. As earlier scholars have argued, rationalization is a central aspect of modernity, especially in Western societies, where rationalization is defined as the process whereby the most efficient manner of organizing action is striven for, with a focus on the optimization of effort. Weber argued that we are becoming more and more rationalized and that we will eventually be stuck in an iron cage of rationality from which we cannot escape [30]. In these ideas of rationality, focus is mostly on the productive sphere of society. In our results we show that some aspects of rationality have even penetrated to govern how gamers view and handle their time spent on gaming as a leisure activity. We have seen how the ideals of rationality control game time and how the personal identity project and efficiency in social interaction are optimized through gaming. To play games too much or in the wrong way is perceived as degrading, non-productive and unhealthy. The question is how it can be used as effectively as possible to fulfill our personal identity projects. This rationalization of leisure does not directly attach to the Weberian view of rationalization in a bureaucratic society or the McDonaldization theory, characterized by efficiency, quantity over quality, standardization and control, but rather to time use in a network society and in relation to an individualization process. We show that in the network society of our contemporary culture [29] and with increasing individualization [18], time spent on playing games is valued and judged in relation to our social relationships and identity project. The time we spend on games and how we manage this time in our everyday life says something to ourselves about who we are, but also communicates who we are to others. In the individualized society our public image is crucial.

As such we argue that rather than being trapped in an iron cage in the Weberian sense we are involved in a 'rational individualization process' where our gaming activities, in terms of the use and management of leisure time, is part of a larger identity project. What we do and how we spend our leisure time expresses who we are, who we want to be and who we cannot be—a project that we are more or less constantly involved in. The purpose of the identity project is about fulfilling and finding oneself, establishing and working on one's social relationships and creating a meaningful social life in an efficient way. We strive for socially meaningful lives where quality is valued over quantity, but where time allocation is weighed against maximum social value for time put in.

This suggests that although we play because it is fun, our use and management of leisure time is vital. At stake is the place of leisure time in the rational time economy that structures our lives. We recommend further research looking more deeply into these processes of rationalization and individualization to see how these further structure our leisure experiences.

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