

Rewilding Attention: Reducing Our Need for Constant Entertainment

Article by Chris Sakellaris

June 12, 2024

The rapid growth of the global entertainment industry is harming not only individual wellbeing but also planetary health. Can humans forgo the instant satisfaction of online games in favour of a deeper appreciation of natural time and embodied experience?

The gaming and toy industries have been steadily growing since the Covid-19 pandemic. Projected revenues for 2024 are set at 416.2 billion euros for the former and 118 billion euros for the latter, an annual increase of 8 per cent and 2.5 per cent respectively. They're not the only industries to have seen major gains: the global casino, sports betting, and gambling industry reached a value of 472 billion euros in 2023, due in large part to the growing popularity of online gambling. The revenues of the global entertainment and media industry, which includes all types of TV and radio broadcasting as well as publishing, are also continuing to reach trillions of dollars, despite a recent slowdown. This growth is a general trend seen across all continents.

Driven in part by the need for distraction and activity during lockdown – for adults and children alike – online and digital games, as well as various forms of media and betting, have replaced more direct and physical types of sociality. The effects of this change seem to be twofold: on the one hand, this online and digital transformation enables a more globalised way of forming community and fostering exchange; on the other, it carries with it an increased risk of isolation, excessive screen time, and lasting cognitive changes, especially for the young. A third aspect is the environmental impact of this digital transition, which requires heavy use of natural resources. Moreover, the potential political and social implications of a society addicted to spectacles and distractions are many.

Not all fun and games

The environmental cost and exploitative labour practices of the toy industry are now common knowledge. Investigations into China's toy factories have uncovered a reality of meagre wages, overwork, and sexual harassment. In the city of Yiwu, where more than half of the world's Christmas decorations and accessories are manufactured, workers are routinely exposed to toxic chemicals including lead paint.

German photographer Michael Wolf's portraits of workers inside China's toy factories in 2004 gave a startling visual illustration of daily life there. Many were rural migrants who spent their days twisting legs, arms, and heads replete with soft cheeks, batting eyelashes, and infant half-smiles onto the torsos of dolls. The project, entitled "The Real Toy Story", also involved a series of exhibitions across the world where Wolf and his colleagues glued together thousands of plastic toys bought in the US, as well as showcasing images from the factories. According to China Labor Watch, many of these workers still face horrendous working conditions.

Global toy manufacturers, such as the American Barbie doll maker Mattel and the German Ravensburger, have begun to take these issues into account, not least because of the public outcry sparked by these investigations. They have attempted to lessen their reliance on China by moving production to countries like India, Mexico, Vietnam, and Malaysia. These changes, however, also seem to be based on economic, rather than solely moral, imperatives: China's labour costs are soaring, and there are, of course, no guarantees that working conditions are going to be better in other countries.

The EU has meanwhile taken steps to address toy safety by banning the use of harmful chemicals in toys sold within the bloc. Similar regulation also exists in the UK and other non-EU countries, including the US and Canada. However, compliance with these regulations is patchy, with substandard toys fabricated outside of Europe still flooding the EU market. In 2023, national enforcement authorities involved in a project supervised by the European Chemicals Agency found that, of roughly 2400 consumer products analysed, toys were only second second only to electronic products in terms of non-compliance with EU laws.

Aside from the toxic chemicals, the toy industry's reliance on global trade and shipping networks compounds its environmental impact. An accident in 1992, in which a cargo ship caught in a storm in the North Pacific dumped thousands of rubber ducks into the sea, was a surreal moment when yet more unnecessary plastic pollution entered the ocean. Some of these ducks floated around the world for years, washing up a decade and a half later on beaches as far away as the UK, Alaska, and Australia.

Players of all kinds

However, toys are no longer the principal plaything of children and young people. The colossal annual revenues for the gaming industry reflect its global popularity. More than two billion people are estimated to be involved in some kind of gaming globally, whether on computers, consoles, or mobile phones. While some consider that video games and the general switch towards digital media could reduce the environmental impact of the entertainment industry – as well as stimulate responses to the climate crisis through games that, for instance, call on players to regenerate drought-stricken landscapes – there are still very big elephants in the virtual room: the human and environmental cost of mining for electronics materials, and the 50 tonnes of electronic waste ending up in landfills around the world every year.

The environmental cost and exploitative labour practices of the toy industry are now common knowledge.

The use of energy for servers and data centres, as well as gaming devices at home, is another critical problem. Although some platforms now offer users the possibility to play online without requiring major hardware, thereby reducing electronic waste, the material impact of energy consumption related to gaming remains. The colossal energy usage of generative AI is also something the gaming industry – and all industries using it – will need to address head-on. And just like toys, gaming is no stranger to unacceptable labour practices, with a 2022 survey by UNI Global Union of workers across 29 countries revealing low pay, mandatory overtime, and discrimination as key issues.

Theme and amusement parks are another necessary focus of attention. The precise human impact and environmental footprint of these land and water-hungry parks is still unclear, but they do feed directly off unsustainable mass tourism. The parks themselves seem to be separate worlds, completely alien to the landscape and communities around them. They, too, are fraught with issues related to testing working conditions and exploitative labour practices: an investigation by Equal Times in 2018, for instance, showed workers at Disneyland in the US earning far less than an MIT research institute's estimation of the minimum hourly living wage.

Lastly, the massive rise in online gambling, facilitated in part by the increasing use of mobile phones, must also be put under the spotlight for its public health impact. In fact, the EU Commission has been

seeking to create a regulatory framework for online gambling. This is rife with complications, however, not least because state-sponsored gambling – national lotteries, sports-related betting – also brings significant revenue into the public coffers. Yet the negative social impact of gambling is noteworthy: in the UK and Ireland, two of Europe’s most liberal countries in terms of betting and gambling, research by University College Dublin has highlighted its contribution to isolation, relationship breakdowns, and emotional crises. In the UK, the industry regulator found that 43 per cent of people who use betting terminals in pubs are either problem or at-risk gamblers.

Bread and circuses

These industries service our need for amusement, stimulation, and distraction. Late-stage capitalism is reliant on perpetual entertainment loops, on the overproduction of media and other products, and on advertising and marketing practices that act as “attention worms”, infiltrating the mind and staying there. We expect and desire everhigher levels of entertainment, just as we do travel and tourism. The construction of artificial consumer needs is an omnipresent social feature, and industries related to entertainment and amusement play a significant cultural role in this.

French philosopher Guy Debord captured the connection between capitalist production and consumption of entertainment. According to Debord, the consumption of “spectacle” in the form of information, propaganda, advertisement, or entertainment is the “model of socially dominant life”. Quite different from the bread and circuses of the past, the ruling processes of today operate in a social landscape characterised by extreme individualism. The coliseum and the hippodrome have converged right in front of our eyes: representation, stimulation, and hyper-reality exist with us – we carry them all the time. Our mental experience is constantly and regularly shaped by this. Through our own content consumption and creation, we are simultaneously spectators and the spectacle itself.

The psychological and cognitive effects of this are potentially immense. Research into distraction and the use of technology is still quite limited, although studies by, for instance, the Center for Humane Technology suggest a link between over-stimulation and increased stress levels, anxiety, and addiction. Much like addiction, our brains become used to a particular outcome that makes us feel better for a short amount of time. When the object or behaviour is removed, we begin to crave it, and a vicious cycle of distraction and satisfaction ensues. And, like all addictive behaviours, feeling satiated becomes a never-ending quest, with dangerous and unhealthy consequences.

A new narrative

What kind of adaptation might be required to tackle this aspect of modern life? How might we think of transforming our relationship to entertainment – to the games we play, the amounts of visual media we watch, and the toys we buy?

Foregrounding ethics of reuse, restoration, degrowth, the wellbeing economy, sustainability, and rewilding might be a start. Green politicians, policymakers, and activists must start addressing these issues and offering a counter-narrative to the dominant growth-driven, exploitative, and extractivist approaches that make entertainment a continuous and easy source of profit. Some ideas could be found in more traditional kinds of sociality, as well as experiential, outdoor games and forms of entertainment that utilise and habitually develop imaginative play. Materiality and embodied experience must be at the forefront of these attempts, including becoming more comfortable with the absence of constant stimuli.

It is also possible to consider a range of policy proposals aimed at transforming and reducing the impact

of the way we entertain ourselves. Corporations that profit from these activities should take responsibility for their impact and ensure their supply chains meet high labour and environmental standards. Community-centred approaches, such as so-called “libraries of things”, where people can share tools, equipment, and other objects, could play a key role at the local level. At the European and national level, environmental levies on toy imports and stringent adherence to regulations around, for instance, labour conditions, must be effectively monitored. Incentives such as tax breaks and subsidies for companies that invest in research and development on sustainable materials in toys and innovative games would be a good idea. Government funding should be redirected towards restorative, low-tech leisure activities.

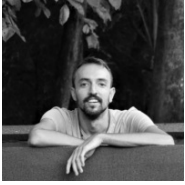
*Creativity and ingenuity are fundamental elements of
the adaptation we must undertake.*

The gaming industry must also start picking up the bill. One small but potentially effective measure would be to add a fee – a kind of Robin Hood Tax to be paid by telecommunications and electronics companies on downloads of games apps. Electronics and hardware companies must also be held responsible for clearing up their own waste, much like plastics companies should.

For gambling, casinos, and theme parks, the approach could be much more radical. The gradual phase-out of theme parks is something that must be considered, in the same way as zoos. These spaces are remnants of a bygone era, a late-19th-century feast of industrial-scale land and water use, overconsumption, and mass entertainment. Although this is not easy, we have seen similar major changes take place: it was not so long ago that the exploitation of animals in circuses was taken for granted; now it is outlawed in many countries. And even though laws around betting and gambling are complicated in part by states’ involvement in the industry, online gambling companies and casinos must be approached in the same way as the tobacco or alcohol industries.

While outright bans on gambling and theme parks might be considered illiberal and possibly counterproductive, harmful activities should be made more and more unprofitable. If we can argue for divestment from fossil fuels, we can do the same for other major economic activities with a huge negative social and environmental impact. Individual consumption choices have a role to play, though we should avoid focusing on individual responsibility. The changes that are required are systemic and socio-cultural in nature, much like the changes in agriculture, transport, energy, diet, and general patterns of consumption.

Creativity and ingenuity are fundamental elements of the adaptation we must undertake to ensure we balance our need for play with the duty of care we have towards the environment. Rewilding our own attention and mental horizons would mean allowing for spaces uninhabited by constant content and for thinking processes that take place in natural time, with delayed satisfaction. Far from an austere and puritanical approach based on denying ourselves “fun”, we must nurture the enjoyment that comes from being present and socially engaged in meaningful but exciting communal activities. The concept of “enough” must be put centre stage, not just for the sake of our attention spans and our mental health, but for the health of the planet.



Chris Sakellaridis is a trainer, poet, translator, and teacher living in London. He has worked in various educational settings in the UK, Greece, and Italy. He is interested in the connections between ecology, anthropology, poetry, and sound, and how they can illuminate areas related to mental health and social and cultural policy.

Published June 12, 2024

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/rewilding-attention-reducing-our-need-for-constant-entertainment/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.

Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.