

Facebook the Orgy-Porgy

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“Ford, we are twelve; oh make us one
Like drops within the Social River;
Oh, make us now together run
As swiftly as thy shining Flivver
Come, Greater Being, Social Friend,
Annihilating Twelve-in-One!
We long to die, for when we end,
Our larger life has but begun.
Feel how the Greater Being comes!
Rejoice and, in rejoicings, die!
Melt in the music of the drums!
For I am you and you are I.
Orgy-porgy, Ford and fun,
Kiss the girls and make them One.
Boys at one with girls at peace;
Orgy-porgy gives release.”

(*Brave New World* 54-56)

Such is the disturbing refrain of *Brave New World's* twisted, drug-fueled ritual of the Orgy-porgy, depicted by Aldous Huxley in his 1931 science fiction classic. The Orgy-porgy (among other social functions in *Brave New World*) is symptomatic of a culture completely controlled by the pursuit of pleasure and reward. All things risky, unpleasant, complicated, or dangerous have been erased and replaced with hyper-social communal rituals such as the quasi-religious and erotic Orgy-porgy, frivolous games like Centrifugal Bumblepuppy, a mind-altering upper known as *soma*, and sensual distractions like the Feelies, films that stimulate all five of the senses.

The characters that inhabit *Brave New World* are afraid of being alone, are motivated only by their consumerism, and have never felt real pain or taken real risks. Their world is dominated solely by “pleasant vices,” and in the words of Mustapha Mond, *Brave New World's* twisted propaganda minister, “You can’t have a lasting civilization without plenty of pleasant vices” (161). The people of Huxley’s *Brave New World* are enslaved not by an iron

fist, but a velvet glove. Their constant and instant access to pleasure has made them sedate, easily controlled, weak, and unable to think for themselves. *Brave New World* shows us the darker side of a technological utopia and poses hard questions: is there such a thing as too much happiness? What are the merits and demerits of risk, danger, pain and suffering? And in a social environment defined strictly by reward and pleasure, can true reward and pleasure even exist?

Garry Kasparov is no stranger to such things as risk, reward, and pleasure. As one of the most famous chess players in history, he claimed his status as world champion in what is considered one of the all-time masterpiece games of chess history in 1985, and held on to his title until the year 2000. Yet Kasparov didn't just defend his title against fellow human chess players—during the late nineties and early two thousands, Kasparov was also the target of the thriving chess super computer industry. In his essay “The Chess Master and the Computer,” Kasparov details his involvement in the world of chess supercomputing, outlining the many man versus machine chess experiments he participated in, eventually telling the story of his defeat at the hands of IBM's chess supercomputer *Deep Blue* in 1997.

Yet Kasparov's essay does not end with his defeat; if anything, that is where it all begins. He engages in a discussion on the sheer complexity of chess, and likens the possibilities of each game to the infinite possibilities of human thought itself; he then moves on to explore the implications of the effects of computers on the ancient game—how chess players practicing in conjunction with computer analysis are “free of prejudice and doctrine . . . [just] as free of dogma as the machines with which they train.” Kasparov argues that computers have created a new normal in chess, upping the standard of skill it takes to be considered a master of the game and churning out an entire generation of human players who are just as good as, if not better than, the chess giants of yesteryear. Ultimately, Kasparov argues that with computer assistance, the chess player's “creativity [is] . . . paramount.”

Despite his obvious admiration for the machines that beat him, Kasparov is quick to point out the new flaws he sees in the computerized culture of chess. He believes that chess computer developers have strayed from the original goal of developing machines that could learn the game as a human does. “Surely this would be a far more fruitful avenue of investigation than creating, as we are doing, ever-faster algorithms to run on ever-faster hardware,” he writes, ultimately concluding that we are discarding our creativity in exchange for a steady supply of marketable products. He believes that our capacity for risk taking in science and industry is dwindling as a result of the

“incrementalism and demands of the market.” In sum, he laments the decrease in risk-taking behavior that he believes is a developing malady in society: as he writes, “we can’t enjoy the rewards without taking the risks.” In a very Huxleyan manner, Kasparov views the consumers of goods—particularly of tech products—as being both misled and content with a lack of progress. So long as what they purchase can entertain and distract them, they will be happy. The producers of goods, whom Kasparov chides in his essay, are aware of this trend and, as a result, put little effort into innovating when they develop new products. Kasparov believes that the joy the user experiences in interfacing with these goods is not true joy, but a kind of illusion—a hollow, cheap thrill, a riskless reward.

But Kasparov views the world from a chess player’s perspective. His entire career is built on risk: big moves, calculated sacrifices, tactical trade-offs, perilous self-exposure, secrecy, painful deliberation, and the constant, stressful awareness of victory teetering on the edge of defeat. Oddly enough, and certainly running counter to the nerdy and sheltered stereotype of the chess player, Kasparov lives a life on the edge. With a career defined by risk, perhaps he over-emphasizes, possibly even romanticizes, the act of risk taking. Kasparov sees man’s proclivity to engage in risky behavior as evaporating in modern society given his definition of risk *as a chess player*. But do we all define what is risk in the same manner? And if not, doesn’t that also change our perception and experience of reward?

An idea prevalent in Sherry Turkle’s essay “Tethering” is that a sense of risk and exposure to risk are vital to one’s identity. Turkle introduces the notion that in the digital age one’s self-concept is becoming increasingly integrated with the technology that surrounds us and all the convenient new tools and toys it provides, including social networking, instant messaging, and constant access to email or other forms of digital media. But Turkle is quick to point out the dangers and shortcomings of this new reality: “[we live] on the Net, newly free in some ways, newly yoked and tethered in others” (221). In turn, this tethering “enable[s] us to store, display, perform, and manipulate aspects of identity” on an unprecedented scale (223). Thus, technology has given birth to a much more fluid and “free” concept of the self, allowing for greater sovereignty of expression and creativity in online social exchanges, which Turkle contends have become the norm. Additionally, because this sense of self now resides partly online, we have the ability to connect with friends and family anywhere, anytime. In this sense, we are “free,” but as a result, we tend to avoid face-to-face interactions with new people and forego exposure to new experiences. Turkle argues that communities now exist on

our phones and our laptops, instead of in our neighborhoods, schools, churches, or clubs. Physically, we find ourselves more isolated than ever, “yoked and tethered” to the objects of our digital addictions.

In addition, due to the ease with which the self can be digitally reconfigured and communicated to others, the risk-taking aspects of identity formation are diminished, and thus the vital rewards are too. Turkle considers this dilemma in terms of adolescence and the formation of identity, which she considers essential rites of passage, and technology’s effects on this transitional period. She writes:

It is a rite of passage that communicates, ‘You are on your own and responsible. If you are frightened, you have to experience those feelings.’ The cell phone buffers this moment; the parent is ‘on tap.’ With the parent-on-tap, tethered children think differently about themselves. They are not quite alone . . . what is not being cultivated is the ability to be alone and to manage and contain [their] emotions. (224)

Turkle might respond to Kasparov by contending that it is not our *capacity* to take risks that is dwindling, but instead our very *exposure* to risk. Even when we are exposed to something traditionally considered risky (navigating the city at night, dealing with conflict) access to a support network is always available, always a touchscreen away. Dealing with risk, pain, loneliness, and danger, then, becomes much easier. Feelings can be quickly outsourced to others, stripping away the complex and unsettling aspects of an experience and spreading them about a social network for all to take note of; as a result, we are left with less to think about and less to feel. According to Turkle, technology has eroded how we experience risk, with neither science nor industry bearing the brunt of the damage; instead, the *individual* and his very sense of self suffer.

Both Kasparov and Turkle seem to grapple with the declining influence of risk on our decision-making. Kasparov discusses risk in light of his own experience playing against chess supercomputers, and with regard to technological innovation and the consumer market. To demonstrate his point, he poses the hypothetical question, “Why waste time and money experimenting with new and innovative ideas when we already know what works?” He encourages the development of new technology but fears its application; he believes that technology has made us *too conservative*, worrying that we will not use our advancing technology as a springboard for the development of new processes and new ideas, but that we will give into the market’s endless stream of only-slightly-better-than-last-year’s tech-products in the name of

making money, avoiding failure, and keeping the masses happy. Turkle, in comparison, reflects upon the possible outcomes of the Internet and communications revolutions *not* in terms of human creativity and scientific advancement in a market culture, but instead in terms of human development in a so-called “always-on culture” dominated by the rapid dissemination of information, constant connectivity, and instant gratification (225). She asserts that the speed and frequency of communication influences how we think, forcing us to abandon our capability to ruminate on and properly digest information. She fears that new technology has made us *too interdependent*. So while we might seem to take risks in communicating with our friends, Turkle believes its not because we’re unafraid but because we’ve become numb to the potential negative outcomes.

Both Kasparov and Turkle are concerned about technology’s impact on our ability to detect and respond to risk. Each argues in some fashion that technology has had some sort of negative effect. Though I see validity in both authors’ essays, I find myself asking: what about Huxley? What about the Orgy-porgies, Centrifugal Bumblepuppies, Feelies, and all the other “pleasant vices” of his *Brave New World*? Though both Kasparov and Turkle offer valid discussions of risk, perhaps risk is not what is at stake here. Perhaps it is not our capacity for risk-taking that has been distorted by the digital age, but instead our sense of what is rewarding, and to what degree.

Huxley could never have fully anticipated the advent of the Internet and web-based social networking. Despite this, the world of the web isn’t a far cry from that of Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Just as Turkle argues in “Tethering,” online social interactions are dominated by the instant reception of reward and satisfaction, as *Brave New World* foreshadowed. The Internet has brought about an entirely new normal in which socializing online is just as important, if not more important, than its offline counterpart. Those who would oppose this march of progress are quickly becoming cultural relics, backwards in their ways and bitterly resistant to the changing tides of social life. Yet it is not hard to see why the Internet has become so pivotal in forming the modern social self; it is a brave new world that minimizes the risk involved in socializing and expression, and cranks up the feelings of reward to a maximum.

My generation lives online through social networking sites such as Facebook. Walls, message boards, and chat rooms are quickly becoming the new public meeting places where friends get together to catch up, reminisce, debate, share and discuss interests, and gossip, all via an eclectic mix of text, photos, videos, and content reproduced from other sources. With so much of

public life now occurring on the web, it's easy to forget that social media giants like Facebook, Twitter, Google, and even Reddit (which is both famous and infamous for its free-spirited, user-created community and culture) are all corporate-style businesses, driven by the fundamental necessity to generate profit that undergirds even the smallest and simplest of companies. For a company like Facebook to keep its user base, and thus the cash it makes advertising to them, it must find new ways to draw the user in and keep him coming back for more. New features and tools are constantly added, tweaked, perfected, all to keep the experience feeling fresh and new for the long-time consumer of the product that is Facebook. Furthermore, Facebook works long and hard to keep competitors out of the market by siphoning off their user base, integrating and subsuming the competition such that a Facebook account may now be linked with a multitude of other online products such as Twitter, Stumbleupon, Instagram, Tumblr, and more. Through such appropriation these products no longer threaten Facebook, but provide yet another reason to use Facebook as a primary online social hub. We've staked a large part of our social lives, and thus important aspects of our identities, on but a few very large social media companies that profit from our continued consumption of their products. Thanks to businesses like Facebook, Google, and Apple, identity in the digital age has become just as lucrative a commodity as corn, coal, or crude.

So where does the concept of reward come into this discussion? In a culture dominated by quick and easy access to all sorts of media, sensationalism is the key. After all, how can any one thing hold our attention for any period of time when we have access to everything? In the fast paced digital-communications culture of the 21st century, companies sensationalize their products more than ever to attract potential consumers and retain current ones. Online social life seems to be centered on who can accumulate the most: who can get the most followers on Twitter, who can rack up the most likes on their status or picture, whose post on the thread has the most upvotes, who has the most original material posted to their blog. The socializing aspect of the web has taken the most superficial aspects of *irl* (a shorthand for "in real life," very well-known to those who frequent online message boards or blogs such as Reddit or Tumblr) and has elevated them to the nth degree. More and more time and effort are devoted to entertaining, showing off, propping up meticulously groomed online personae, and the one-way transmission of ideas, and less effort is devoted to actually communicating with others and learning about them. Just as in Huxley's dystopian England, everything online has been designed to quickly and effectively transmit a sense of

reward, accomplishment, success, and pleasure. The marketers of social media have effectively convinced us that without their products, without more likes, more followers, more reblogs, more upvotes, more shares and posts and albums and videos and check-ins and tags, we will not be cool.

A sense of reward propels the success and popularity of the social media market. Anyone who has ever camped out, fixated in front of his computer, refreshing the page every five minutes awaiting the moment in which his clever status or photo from last night's party secures yet another like or comment, knows this intimately. Turkle hints at this very phenomenon in "Tethering" when she writes: "[The online self] measures success by calls made, e-mails answered, contacts reached. This self is calibrated on the basis of what technology proposes, by what it makes possible, by what it makes easy" (225). Though Turkle frames her discussion of web culture (and thus "tethered culture") primarily in terms of risk, emotional communication, and isolation versus connectivity, here she hints at the very same distortion of reward that is at the root of marketed Internet culture. Just as Turkle does, the Internet social media giants recognize that we measure our success, and as a result, the validity of our online identities, in part by what technology makes possible. Consequently, they've given us more features, tools, and routes by which we may achieve that sweet sense of online instant gratification. Social networking is all about feeling rewarded, special, and successful—*immediately*. But we must wonder whether, in a social environment where everything is interpreted as massively rewarding, satisfaction loses its value.

In one of the final scenes of *Brave New World*, John, a "savage" discovered outside the World Government's sphere of influence who has been inducted into Mustapha Mond's carefully constructed tyranny of pleasure, confronts the propaganda minister, deriding the sham of "pleasant vices" and arguing in favor of reintroducing to society the complexities of pain, God, poetry, danger, freedom, and sin. "Whether 'tis better in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," he snidely asks, "or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them. . . . But you don't do either. Neither suffer nor oppose. You just abolish the slings and arrows. It's too easy" (162). In a sense, John mounts the same offense as Kasparov and Turkle: namely, that danger, risk, death, and the possibility of failure are all necessary to advance and grow on both an individual and collective level. John cites the self-denial and humility caused by failure and risk taking as pillars of society, as the most important virtues that can define a man. He recognizes the absurdity of pure and constant reward, all the while acknowledging the necessity of *reward in moderation*. Huxley argues through John that

failure builds character as much as reward, and that self-induced denial of pleasure and easy victories is necessary to strike a keen balance between the two. Perhaps Huxley, Kasparov, and Turkle would all agree that by denouncing and degrading risk, we are denying the very things that lend us our individual senses of self.

In response to John's attack, Mond reveals the darker side of reward: "Industrial civilization is only possible when there's no self-denial. Self-indulgence up to the very limits imposed by hygiene and economics. Otherwise the wheels stop turning" (161). He correlates indulgence with happiness, and happiness with social stability. And yet, the act of indulging does not always imply the attainment of happiness, as Kasparov notes when he writes, "We can't enjoy the rewards without taking the risks." It is quite possible that we must first know what it is like to be without something before we can truly enjoy it.

Yet the social networking culture of the 21st century has proven the contrary. Teens spend countless hours on websites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr; a "healthy" social life is now predicated on having a vibrant and prolific online personality, and one's social prowess is in part determined by how many people one can stay digitally connected to, and how frequently. This constant thirst for connection and recognition is what Aldous Huxley feared most when he penned *Brave New World*. He feared that we would become a culture ruled by all things trivial, too concerned with our own analogs of the Orgy-porgy (Facebook), the Centrifugal Bumblepuppy (Twitter), or the Feelies (Tumblr, Instagram, Reddit, and whatever else may be our vices) to deal with the real world. He was not worried about society caving in to traditional forms of totalitarianism by which men are so often painfully oppressed. He believed instead that men would be pleasantly oppressed, bound by their desires and their "infinite appetite for distractions" and pleasures (*Revisited* 35). Modern social networking has shown, more than ever, that Huxley's fear of a culture driven by this appetite for desire is not only possible, but even viewed as healthy by those who have given in and connected to the Greater Being—the Facebook that awaits.

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