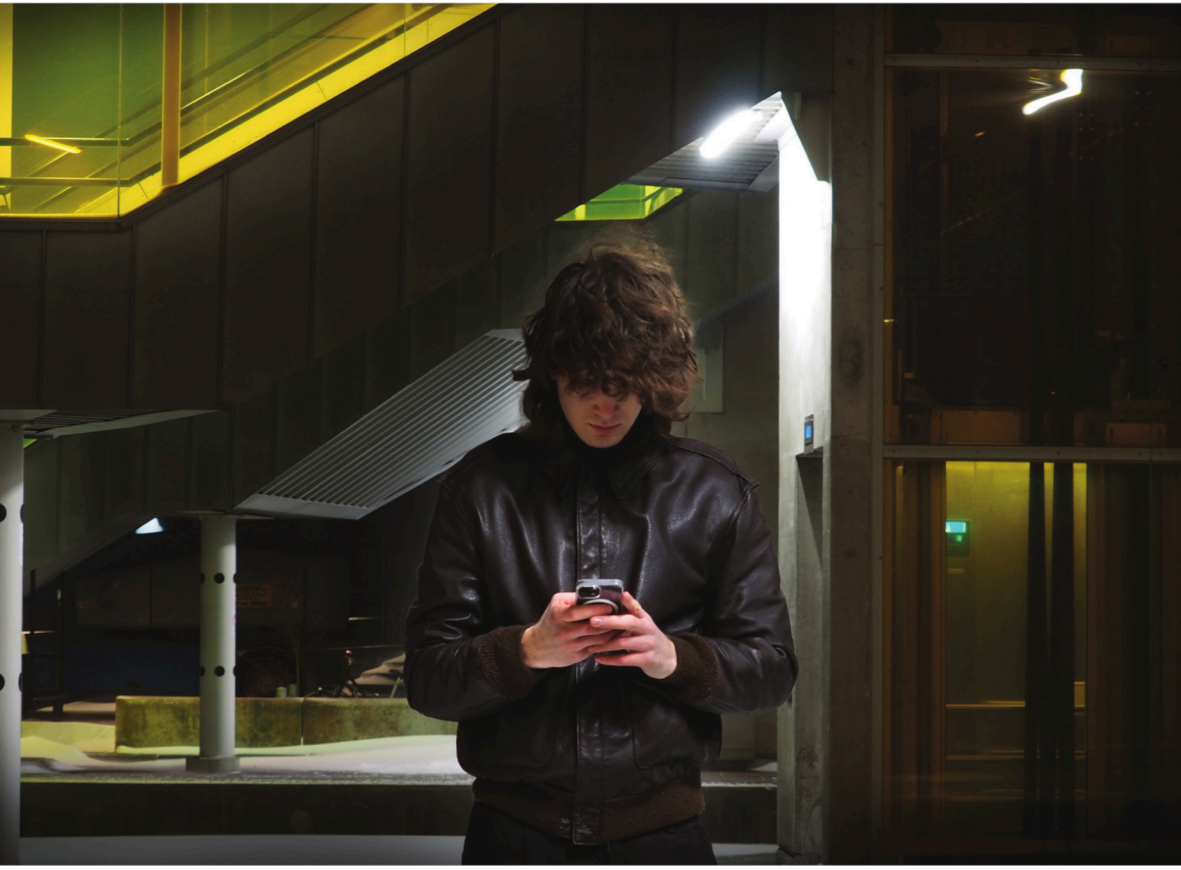
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DIGITAL FLÂNEURS



An Ethnography of Scrolling, Screen Time, and Inequalities Among Youth in Vienna

SUZANA JOVIČIĆ

DIGITAL FLÂNEURS

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Preface

Writing about contemporary digital phenomena in academia is tricky. By the time empirical data is analyzed and drafted, it may already feel dated; by publication, it risks seeming archaic. App and platform names, once ubiquitous, fade quickly from collective memory. This book is no exception—digital tools evolve in look, feel, and sound, although the tech industry's core drive persists: crafting attractive spaces to retain attention and profit. Yet, decades of internet scholarship affirm that people resist blind seduction by glossy interfaces and slick rhetoric. The book captures an ephemeral snapshot of Viennese youth and digital life in the late 2010s. While the book was written before generative AI like ChatGPT became ubiquitous, I suspect that the ambiguities and subtleties of engagement with digital media described in this book will continue into the age of AI: from digital literacy and inequalities to privacy and misinformation. (Young) people will not dissolve into spectral machine captives, stripped of history, memory, attachments, emotions, critical thought, or aspirations. Though ethical and environmental challenges concocted by new digital market criers may intensify, human agency endures.

Introduction

A youth center on the outskirts of Vienna—an unassuming building nestled beside a quiet social housing complex whose large gray concrete walls are sparsely lit by evening streetlights. Suddenly, agitated voices grow louder. Startled, you turn to see a group of young men, all dressed in dark clothes, chasing someone down the empty street. Looking closer, you might recognize Armin, laughing and out of breath, his friends chasing him because he is carrying a packet of dextrose sweets. As on almost every weekday evening, they are heading toward the youth center entrance surrounded by a mural that staff and visitors once painted. When you arrive inside, the rooms feel spacious yet dimly lit, with temporary islands of socializing and noise forming and then dispersing here and there. Brightly colored, donated sofas have been arranged invitingly in circles amid the semidarkness. In one of these quieter corners, you might see Mehti, fifteen years old, an asylum seeker from Chechnya, his face faintly lit by his smartphone screen, bowed downward, shoulders slightly hunched forward. At first glance, a familiar scene slipping easily into cliché: a teenager lost in his phone, settled into a worn sofa, the buzz of voices and clatter of billiard balls echoing around him. He appears distant, disconnected from the world, immersed in an endless stream of images, videos, likes, and alternative lives passing before his eyes. Around him, the space is alive with motion, teenagers drifting between sofas, a staff member tidying behind the alcohol-free bar, laughter ringing from the ping-pong table. Outside, trams weave between Vienna's concrete apartment blocks, carrying people home for the evening. But inside this free leisure space for children and youths, time feels suspended.

Look beyond the two-dimensional image, though, and there is more to see: A world shaped by tantalizing yet hungry design is also entan-

gled with agency; enlivened by friendships; pierced by schooling, employment, migration, and asylum; and imbued with the rhythms of the broader space and time fabric Mehti is part of. Mehti lives with his parents and six siblings back in their crowded apartment, where four of them share a bedroom. Privacy is rare. But here, alone with his phone, his world narrows to the small glowing screen and the steady rhythm of his thumb scrolling. Surrounded but alone, he is free, a temporary flâneur in a space of his own. In this fleeting moment, togetherness and solitude are stitched together through the act of scrolling, leading to the lingering question: If scrolling is the answer, what is the question?[1]

This book, based on an ethnography of digital media practices in young people's lives, starts with a simple premise: It seeks to explore the seemingly effortless motion of scrolling "mindlessly" through smartphone content—a trope that is seemingly easy to moralize about and problematize, but that is harder to think with. But why should something as trivial, fleeting, and detached as the vertical swiping motion of a thumb be of anthropological interest? For an anthropologist, this is certainly not a usual point of departure. It will become clear, however, that this simple motion can tell a much bigger story: not only one of intentionally effortless design, but also one that foregrounds the contexts in which these movements through digital spaces take place. The reader is invited to spend time with young people hanging out in various places around Vienna with their friends, learning about their play, pleasures, concerns, and challenges at a moment of major transition—finishing school and taking first steps toward finding and making sense of employment. As a research focus, scrolling thus attunes us to the casual joys of life in a buzzing (digital) environment that seems full of opportunities, but also—and more prominently in this book—to the inequalities that permeate young people's everyday lives. In this context, scrolling shifts from a seemingly neutral and barely perceptible movement into a political practice that is inseparable from young people negotiating uncertain futures and, at times, precarity: whether tied to school systems, social mobility, migration, labor conditions, or societal values like the understanding of time and productivity.

It is the latter point that lies at the crux of this book's main argument. The moment we begin to search for color and texture around movements through digital spaces—that is, when we zoom out from the suspended flow of endless content—we encounter a tension regarding how the time spent with it ought to be used. This suspended time quickly slips into problematic, potent territory: The notion of waste emerges, especially when juxtaposed with the idea that we are missing something vaguely meaningful. Scrolling seems to lead nowhere. It

stands as an antithesis to movement and productivity, regardless of the content or context.

This tension becomes particularly palpable when it intersects with seemingly malleable or marginalized populations, such as young people who ought to be molded into productive members of society, members who resist temptations of nonsense, distraction, straying, or criminality. The tension intensifies further when waiting, chronic boredom, and unemployment enter the picture—when ruptured biographies, migration, or racialized exclusion lead to fragmented lives and stalled imaginations of the future. Far from the image of the once promenading privileged aristocratic flâneur, young people strolling through digitalized commercial arcades without a clear purpose often receive far less grace. Yet, as I will argue, the closer we look, the more smartphones or digital media in general fade into the background as neat culprits of doom, which is how they are often portrayed. Instead, we find ourselves confronting the raw face of uncertainties and inequalities—issues far larger than how addictive social media platforms are designed or how time is "wasted" in flânerie through these spaces.

Zooming out from practices like scrolling, without losing sight of their architecture and rhythms, is crucial when considering the expectations placed on young people regarding how they should navigate digitalized space and time. I will argue later that behind the well-intentioned surface of digital empowerment, literacy, and enlightenment, there can also lie culturally embedded fantasies of mastery over space and time. Alongside such fantasies lie assumptions that young people are both passive pawns of the global tech industry yet also potential resistance warriors who ought to fight addiction, hate speech, or fake news, and who are ready to reclaim the space. Everyday life, however, whether digital or analog, does not unfold in superlatives or opposition—it happens in the mundane, effortless space of being, through casual scrolls in between play or microtransactions of money, data, and attention. In this book, I develop this argument along three interlinked strands: (1) the social and political conditions in which mundane digital practices like scrolling take place; (2) the design of porous, playful, and effortless online spaces; and (3) the associated space and time regimes in which digital design, young people and their digital practices are embedded. As the book weaves these strands together, the seemingly trivial practice of scrolling will reveal a deeper political meaning. Before delving into the lived experiences of the young people featured in this book, however, I will first outline the analytical angle by examining the common, historically entrenched tropes surrounding youths' use of digital media technologies and notions of digital time wasting.

Youths Out of Control

In contemporary Austria, as in many other countries around the world, it is practically impossible to discuss young people's use of digital media technologies without invoking the persistent image of the dangers of idle "mindless scrolling" bordering on addiction. However, neither digital media practices nor youth as depicted in this mental imaginary and popular trope are universal or fixed concepts; rather, they are constantly evolving and embedded within broader social, political, and historical contexts. The following sections take a first step toward unpacking some of these notions.

Sensationalized Practices

"The telephone mania is among the latest negative results of modern inventions," proclaimed the opening sentence of an article published in the US newspaper *Western Electrician* in 1897. Rather grudgingly, the author went on to explain:

> The telephone maniacs are usually men of leisure who have small appreciation of the value of time, and the more leisure they have the less hope there is for them, as far as cure is concerned. . . . An unmistakable symptom of the disease is a desire to talk to people at distant points about all sorts of things at all hours of the day or night.

With their "senseless chatter and constant 'helloing,'" the author states, "they insist on telling long stories over the wire" all the while "regardless of the hour or the pressure of business" (Chatfield 2016). The popularity of such "senseless chatter" was likely the reason that, during the 1918 influenza pandemic, telephone companies urged the public to refrain from telephoning unless "absolutely necessary" to keep manually operated lines clear for doctors and pharmacies (Chatfield 2016). Fast-forward to the 2020s. The chatter has shifted to smartphones and the vast spaces of the internet, which do not discourage but rather profit from people spending time "on the line." In fact, by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the tables had long since turned, with the use of digital chatter boxes constantly surging. One concern, however, seems to have withstood the test of time: The idea of the "telephone maniacs" still lingers in the popular image of the "smartphone generation" (Twenge 2017), who seemingly cannot stop spending idle time on their telephones, engaging in new manifestations of "senseless chatter." These digital practices, which include "mindless scrolling," would

likely be considered addictive and devoid of purpose by many educators, policymakers, and youths alike. Indeed, the practices that resemble the "senseless chatter" of "men of leisure" described in 1897 lie at the center of this book. Instead of the "men of leisure," the protagonists in this book are the Viennese youths I encountered in youth centers, schools, and state-funded employment measures for young people between 2018 and 2023.

In fact, it is not uncommon for media researchers to begin a conversation about new media technologies with such historical examples of objects that were thought to have had an almost mythical capacity to profoundly change what makes us human. It is hard to resist this temptation because the similarity between old and new concerns can be uncanny indeed. Take, for example, the cartoon published in the British satirical magazine *Punch* in 1906, in which we see a man and a woman in Hyde Park (Baumer 1906). They are sitting together but are facing away from each other. In their laps lies a wireless telegraph, a revolutionary technology at the time. The cartoonist titles the picture: *The Development of Wireless Telegraphy. Scene in Hyde Park.* He then goes on to explain: "These two figures are not communicating with one another. The lady is receiving an amatory message, and the gentleman some racing results." Update the Victorian fashion style and the objects in question, and we arrive at the familiar image of broken sociality, of people looking at their smartphones rather than conversing with each other. Later, early telephony experienced a similar crisis—instead of transmitting information as intended by the telephone companies and governments, the telephone became popular as a *théâtrophone* in France and a *pleasure telephone* in the UK, transmitting live entertainment as part of subscription packages (Bonea et al. 2019: 63). From Socrates, who feared the demise of the cognitive faculties through the medium of writing, to those who found Elvis Presley's dancing on television provocative, history is replete with examples of such fears of social change, moral decline, and strange dependencies on new media, and some of these fears persist until today. In the eighteenth century, for example, the German linguist, pedagogue, and publisher Joachim Heinrich Campe defined "reading addiction" as an uncontrolled desire to read—a hedonistic activity of reading novels as opposed to reading religious texts (Scheibenbogen 2022: 14). These historical continuities are not only amusing but also revealing, because they so obviously point to the fact that society's perception of new technologies is a product of its time.

But they also remind us that disruptions are attributed to certain groups more than others—often it is women who seemed morally jeop-

ardized by the birth of romance novels, unemployed "leisure men" by telephones, and young people by comics, to name just a few examples. The prevailing anxieties of particular time periods are telling. It is hardly a coincidence that Joachim Heinrich Campe also feared that reading addiction would mainly affect women and children because, in his view, men tend to read serious, work-related literature. The authors of the book *Anxious Times* show how the early twentieth century was characterized by a multitude of fears of overstimulation due to the flood of information enabled by mass media. At the center of these fears were often children and women, whose new appearance and new way of life—thin, short haired, and childless—was interpreted by some as a sign of a nervous disorder that new social-stress factors caused. The ideas of the German and US American conservative psychiatrist Fredric Wertham seem similarly curious. In his influential book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), Wertham feared not only that comics were the source of juvenile delinquency, moral decay, and perversion, but also that young people would be unable to read longer texts once they got used to speech bubbles. He also saw Batman as a "homosexual pedophile" and Wonder Woman as a "man-hating lesbian". At the height of the comic book condemnation in the US between the 1940s and 1970s, a similar process unfolded in Austria. Richard Bamberger, the leader of the Austrian Youth Book Club, saw himself as a warrior against trivial literature. In cooperation with the Austrian Ministry of Education, he led a campaign called the Big Cleanup, in which schoolchildren could exchange "three junk magazines" (Schundhefte) for a "good book."[2] The "junk" usually consisted of romance novels, westerns, and comics, which, according to an "anti-comic missionary," led to "stupefaction and total brain softening through text in speech bubbles and brutalization through stick figures" (Bauer and Bauer 2024).

Fast-forward to the anxious 2020s, and hardly a day goes by in Vienna, where I am based at the time of writing, without seeing an alarmist media report about the effects of social media and smartphones on the minds, bodies, empathy, sociality, and basically the ability of children and young people to develop into full human beings. Such tropes are highly pervasive on a global scale. Terms such as the "bowed-head tribe" (低頭族) in Mandarin Chinese, the "thumb tribe" (oyayubizoku) in Japanese, or "smombies" (a combination of smartphone and zombie and the 2015 Youth Word of the Year in Germany) tend to describe young people buried in their smartphones, head down, thumbs scrolling through social media feeds, seemingly unable to resist the lure of the "chattering machines" (Chatfield 2016). Emerging apps targeting young people often quickly slip into a "danger zone" in global media

coverage, with press reports linking their use to various moral risks or safety concerns. For example, the US-based dating app Tinder has been associated with "immorality, promiscuity, and danger" (Duguay 2018: 127). Similarly, the anonymous social media platform Yik Yak has drawn criticism for facilitating cyberbullying (Shepherd and Cwynar 2018), while Pokémon Go, a location-based game, has also been deemed problematic for leading young people into potentially dangerous public spaces (Mowlabocus 2018).

Much of the public would agree that social media and smartphones seem to have created "zombified social media addicts" (boyd 2014: 78) who seem to lose control as digital technologies slowly but surely gnaw away at their well-being and mental health (Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2020). The anxiety surrounding new technologies and media is morphing into an updated version of the anxieties of the nineteenth century. For Jonathan Haidt, psychologist and author of *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (2024), young people are at the epicenter of an anxiousness pandemic that is being greatly exacerbated by social media. We learn of disturbing trends of increased suicides, depression, and anxiety diagnoses, all words that weigh heavily. As I write these words, one of the main intellectual left-leaning newspapers in Vienna published a report (Schuhmacher 2024) on the previously mentioned book, titled *Why Is Gen Z Depressed, Nervous and Suicidal?* The implicit answer: Social media and smartphones are the culprits of doom.

There is an important distinction between the term *addiction* as used in everyday conversations and addiction as a clinical construct. Like internet addiction, which was originally a satirical term coined by psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg and that came to public attention in 1995, smartphone addiction is a concept more prevalent in popular media than in psychiatry, where it is not (yet) recognized as an addiction. Nevertheless, like internet addiction and mobile phone addiction before it (Bianchi and Phillips 2005; Reid and Reid 2007; Takao, Takahashi, and Kitamura 2009), problematic smartphone behavior has been discussed in a number of international studies that reach varying conclusions (Billieux et al. 2015; Panova and Carbonell 2018). General estimates of internet-related addictions range from 0.8 percent to 26.7 percent (Kuss et al. 2014), including smartphone addiction itself (M. Kwon et al. 2013). In general, authors exploring smartphone-related "addiction," "dependence," or "problematic behavior" refer to withdrawal symptoms such as increasing tolerance (usually equated with increasing hours spent online), withdrawal, or orientation to devices and online worlds (Kim et al. 2014). Some of these studies take a rather generous approach to

defining addictive behaviors, as in the case of "selfitis" scales designed to measure "addiction to selfies" in a clinical context (Balakrishnan and Griffiths 2018). Although more obscure addictions such as selfitis are likely to share the fate of a few lone papers on "carrot addiction" (Kaplan 1996), the issues addressed here sound familiar. The woman formerly with the telegraph on her lap is now consuming too much social media (social media addiction is more likely to be attributed to women and girls), and the man expecting gambling results is now likely a gamer (gaming addictions are more likely to be attributed to men). Surveys on media use in German-speaking countries echo similar concerns with problematic internet use, mainly based on the amount of time spent online. For example, in the 2020 study by the German Federal Centre for Health Education, the authors claim that 30 percent of twelve- to seventeen-year-olds use the internet in a problematic way, while 8 percent are considered to have an internet-related disorder (Orth and Merkel 2019). The trend is worrying the authors, who emphasize that the numbers have increased in recent years. What many of these studies have in common, however, is that they base their conclusions on time spent online, a highly problematic and outdated measure, given the growing potential of the smartphone to be used for work alongside leisure activities that were once accessed through different media.

Despite the relatively small number of those clinically affected globally (compared with substance abuse, for instance), it is surprising that alarmist perspectives are frequently cited, often in a way that conflates clinical and vernacular contexts and overlooks the cautious statements of psychologists who point out that correlation is not necessarily causation. As the number of mental health problems appears to have increased in recent years, as has the use of digital technologies, many attempts have been made to establish a link between these two developments. The results, however, are not always conclusive because they may be limited in scope, analyze the extent of social media use and not the content, focus only on negative impacts, or fail to consider individual differences or different sociocultural contexts and minorities (D'Arienzo, Boursier, and Griffiths 2019; Ito et al. 2020; Sutton 2020).

Probably the most banal reason for this one-sided representation might be the fact that dramatic stories are indeed more entertaining to read and more likely to go viral. Stories of people falling down a well while taking selfies or spectacular metanarratives of a social crisis are indeed likely to draw more attention than studies that report on how complex and varied people's use of (digital media) technologies is and was. As the sociologist Judy Wajcman (2014) points out, much of the (gendered) attention is given to spectacular gadgets like motors, com-

puters, and smartphones, while innovations like a condom or a washing machine tend to be overlooked when we think about the groundbreaking impact of technologies on care work throughout history.

Another possible reason why alarming psychological studies of media use, often conducted in a neat world of measurement tools and precise technologies, are arguably overrepresented is that they can satisfy the need of anxious parents craving the scientific certainty of data-driven parenting. And certainty is best provided by precise, quantified, and easily marketable recommendations about how many hours their children should spend online, providing a kind of quantified comfort that we have become accustomed to in biomedicine. But there is more to parents' concerns. British media scholars Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross (2020) argue, for example, that British parents' growing fears in relation to "screen time" are also symptomatic of their struggle against the declining welfare state and rising inequalities. In this context, control over screen time appears to be a lever that parents still seem to hold in their hands. In a world that seems to be spinning out of control, regulating screen time and shielding youths from the online world appears as an attainable task for parents and educators. Parents are expected to enable their children to keep up with the ideals of digital literacy, ideals that are particularly difficult for disadvantaged families to achieve (Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2020).

What seems to drive these concerns, I argue, is not only a fear of losing individual autonomy over minds and bodies but also a broader cultural anxiety about relinquishing control—be it over our environment, new technologies, or over the younger generation. Digitalization, much like globalization in earlier decades, becomes the locus for these anxieties: a vast, abstract force that feels as if it is pulling the rug out from under us. As Doreen Massey argues about globalization, this seemingly threatening, abstract cloud over our heads "evokes a powerful vision of an immense, unstructured, free unbounded space and of a glorious complexity" (2005: 81). This imperative to reassert control is particularly visible in the regulation of young people's media use. In my research in Vienna, I encountered parents who not only monitored their teenagers' chat messages but also demanded constant updates on their location. These intimate practices of surveillance and regulation, I suggest, reflect an underlying societal effort to manage uncertainty and assert control in the face of rapid social and technological change. Notably, such efforts are not limited to young children who may need guidance but also extend to adolescents and young adults—a group historically constructed as especially susceptible to the purported risks of new media and new freedoms. The brief digres-

sion on the emergence of "youth" in Austria that follows will further demonstrate this.

Emerging Youth

At the end of the nineteenth century, "youth" did not exist as a universal concept in Austria. A Romantic concept of middle-class youth, captured by the German word *Jünglinge*, involved an idea of transition and vulnerability, while working-class youth moved directly from childhood to occupation-based labels such as "apprentice" and "casual laborer" (Wegs 1992: 441). While historians do not necessarily agree on how these class-based categories converged into "youth" as a singular category in Europe, the historian Robert Wegs (1992) argues that social and economic changes at the turn of the century helped to create "youth" as a new cross-class category. Rapid industrialization, the emergence of factory work as opposed to the apprenticeship system, and migration to urban areas permitted young people a new level of economic and social freedom. Such changes are not particularly unusual. Historians writing on the concept of adolescence in Europe note that the ages associated with this category have changed over the centuries, as have societal expectations of work, responsibility, and control. In medieval Europe, for example, the mechanism of apprenticeship marked the boundaries of a period of life in which parental control and rights of discipline were relinquished to "masters" after the parents made an initial payment. For young men, this was a gateway to economic independence, while marriage usually provided an entry point for women. Over the centuries, the conditions of entry into adulthood changed in line with the circumstances. For instance, during the demographic changes caused by plague and labor shortages, young people were sent to apprenticeships later, which also postponed their entry into adulthood and the end of their "adolescence" (Hanawalt 1992). With industrialization, much of Austria's youth also moved away from the declining artisanal mode of production and into unskilled factory work. This was financially advantageous—they could earn money faster and forgo paying master artisans, a mode of production that was already in decline. It was seemingly a win-win situation, as the factories could make good use of the underpaid and exploited unskilled factory workers. For the adult population, however, this meant new concerns—young people were neither under parental control nor under the control of a substitute master but were instead roaming the streets of Vienna. As the concept of apprenticeship declined, and with it this form of control and discipline, new mechanisms of social control took their place. For the wealthier classes, con-

trol could be exercised through inheritance, marriage, and educational expectations. For the working-class youth, the question of control was more complicated, especially as the Industrial Revolution and wage labor led to their increasing independence (Hanawalt 1992).

Such dynamics were not limited to Austria but were also prevalent in Europe and the US during the first decade of the twentieth century, because the increasing visibility of working-class youths and a preoccupation with crime led to them being deemed problematic (Wegs 1992). The perceived increase in juvenile delinquency (which the historian Wegs questions due to changing definitions of crime) led to the emergence of criminology in the US and Europe and studies of juvenile delinquency and defiant behavior (as continued in the Chicago School). In the creation of "problematic youth" as a category, according to the anthropologist Mary Bucholtz, sociology complacently focused on "spectacular and sensational aspects of youth culture," such as delinquency and deviance, just as anthropologists were drawn to the study of sexuality through cross-cultural comparison, for example, in the influential work of Margaret Mead (Bucholtz 2002: 539). In Austria, the term *Jugendliche*, denoting working-class youths, started to circulate in the context of juvenile courts amid calls for reformatories (*Besserungsanstalten*) for juveniles and efforts to control vagrant youths through "vagrancy laws" (Wegs 1992: 443).

While initial efforts to tackle the problem of juvenile delinquency led to punitive measures, the turn of the century also brought new concerns about welfare and alternative approaches to bringing order to the situation in industrial contexts. Experts, including social scientists, reformers, and politicians, began to consider reforming the new class of neglected young factory workers who seemed to lack moral control. Since the legal working age in Austria started at fourteen and workers' children rarely attended school, the influence of educational institutions was limited. These efforts were accompanied by a more positive view of "youth"—a circumstance that allowed for a more generalized definition of youth beyond the working classes. In and around Vienna, journals, conferences, and publications emerged that addressed various issues concerning young people and offered new ways of molding them into moral citizens. Calls were made for the reintroduction of apprenticeships and the expansion of schooling, as well as efforts to involve working-class youths in activities sponsored by the government, the church, or political parties (Hanawalt 1992; Wegs 1992). Economic and geographical independence also changed the rites of passage, which were no longer collectively controlled by adults but negotiated among peers who engaged in individual experiments with sex, marriage, and

alcohol consumption. While earlier escapades were channeled through celebrations such as carnivals, military activities, or fraternities, the youths of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries strolled the streets of European cities and hung out in cafés and cinemas; they began to develop their own styles of dress, and they danced waltz and Charleston, displaying scandalous forms of physical contact (Hanawalt 1992). This situation led to the emergence of a variety of clubs and organizations, from scouts to sports clubs and nature activities to organizations supported by political parties in Austria (Bauer and Bauer 2024).

In Vienna, efforts to curb such scandalous activities were included in the agenda of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Austria (now the Social Democratic Party of Austria—SPÖ) that was to shape the trajectory of Vienna until today, with the exception of the Nazi period of the 1930s and 1940s. In a period known as Red Vienna, the "red" Social Democrats emerged victorious after World War I, which resulted in the extension of universal suffrage to all citizens, including women. They introduced a myriad of welfare measures. The education system was reformed, subsidized childcare facilities and maternity clinics were set up, and measures to reduce tuberculosis and infant mortality and raise awareness of the importance of dental health followed. In addition to improving working conditions and reducing working hours, the Viennese Social Democrats developed what has become their trademark to this day: housing projects that created sixty-five thousand flats by 1932, housing one-tenth of Vienna's population. The measures taken to handle the rising population and the housing shortage after World War I were funded through the newly introduced *Wohnbausteuer*, a housing tax to raise funds for subsidized buildings. After it was recognized that social circumstances and living conditions also led to mental and psychological illness, these efforts were also linked to the goal of creating a healthy population. The new flats were built according to the principles of "light, air, and sunlight," as a contrast to the earlier dark, overcrowded housing. These efforts were accompanied by campaigns that included exhibitions on how to live, what minimalist furniture to buy, and appeals to avoid nonfunctional decorations and cluttering objects (Bauer and Bauer 2024).

The reformation of the "primitive" and "inadequate" working class and especially of the youth was an explicit part of the agenda of the party leadership, who usually came from privileged circles. In 1929, the newspaper *Arbeiter-Zeitung* celebrated "a decade of cultural progress for the broad masses, from the smoky, dull tavern to the cinema, from the cinema to the football field, from there to the theater, to the books, to the mountains" (Bauer and Bauer 2024, my translation). A number of

working-class libraries, including youth libraries, sprang up across the city with the aim of making books and education accessible to the working class, who could not afford books. The libraries, a political endeavor based on voluntary work, curated literature for the working class, while socialist politicians complained about their preference for "trashy literature," including the popular genres of Wild West or kitsch novels, which were banned from the libraries. In the *Bildungsarbeit* newspaper published in 1909, the authors wrote: "We want to advise our comrades on what they should read, but also warn them against the frivolous recommendations of booksellers, who all too often succeed in tempting workers to spend their hard-earned money on useless 'trash' [Schund]" (Bauer and Bauer 2024, my translation). The advancement of the working class was not only the task of libraries. From the late nineteenth century onward, a large number of clubs for adults, children, and young people emerged, covering everything from sports and nature walks to Esperanto courses, children's theater, and alcohol abstinence clubs. The working class, it was argued by the public figures of the time, should give up smoking, drinking, and dancing in favor of education, sport, and the enjoyment of proper literature. Slogans like "Thinking workers don't drink" were common. The city organized a workers' symphony orchestra, readings, political lectures, theater, cabaret, film, choirs—all with the aim of getting the working class out of the alcohol-infested taverns and getting children and youths off the streets while teaching them healthy habits and good taste. In the "red children's theater" ("rotes Kasperltheater"), children could play with puppets whose adventures included fighting enemies called the "alcohol ghost," "nicotine devil," and "beer witch" (Bauer and Bauer 2024). One could say that such developments led to an unintentionally unified agenda between explicitly socialist and conservative concerns about the sophistication of youthful taste in relation to media consumption—a seemingly overarching national project to create new ideal citizens.

There was another side effect of this change in the preoccupation with "youth" as a category. Under the new scientific focus, the concept of "adolescents" became universalized, and this pushed class-based labels into the background. In the early twentieth century, the concept of adolescence as we know it today started to be built on the idea of a psychological and physiological state of fragility that was reminiscent of *Jünglinge* from the Romantic period of Sturm and Drang. Adolescence became a purely transitional state on the path to adulthood, a state of becoming rather than being. A state in which, in a Western biomedical perspective, a seemingly biological fragility heightens the tension between individual agency and structural constraints imposed by social

institutions—in other words, a time of crisis and psychological distress (Bucholtz 2002). The state of this seemingly universal adolescence has been heavily critiqued by anthropologists, who frame adolescence as culturally shaped rather than solely a biological phase. It is, therefore, a concept that varies across cultural and historical settings (Jenkins and Csordas 2020). Yet, despite this evidence, adolescence is now further biologized by the neuroscience of the "teenage brain" and exacerbated by popular science publications on the subject—a genre that promises to offer comfort and relief to parents struggling to cope with changing relationships with their teenagers. This transitional period of becoming, hence, is now one of turbulence and vulnerability.

If we add to this vulnerability and instability the threat of the dangers of addiction and predators lurking in the vast internet space, the result seems, unsurprisingly, explosive. Within this context, the turbulence of youth has to be tamed, along with the internet. Young people's well-being now seems especially challenged in the face of the predatory technological worlds that prominent scholars have warned about: a world where surveillance, behavioral cues, dark patterns, and nudges built into screens limit our autonomy and agency in increasingly intelligent environments. Ironically, Silicon Valley professionals, some of whom are now vocal critics of the technologies they helped create, play an important role in these narratives—demonstratively shielding their children and banning them from using digital technologies at home (Alter 2017). When the alchemists of our time warn us to stay away from a potion they have concocted, we are inclined to listen. In some ways, I will argue, the echoes of the concerns evident in Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century are still evident today. Waltz and the Charleston have morphed into TikTok reels,[3] but the implicit concern with fast and flawed entertainment is now associated less with "working classes" and more with the awkward categories of "lower socioeconomic background" and "migrant background" (an awkwardness I will admit to reproducing at times).

Youths in Control?

In contrast to much of the psychological work on problematic digital media use, the empirical strands of science and technology studies (STS), media studies, and the social sciences, including anthropology (the primary lens taken in this book), tend to paint a more optimistic picture of "users." In these (usually qualitative) studies, users emerge not as homogenized victims of digitalization but as social actors sitting in the "control hub" (Miller et al. 2021: 94) of their digital media use. Research on

digital media technologies builds on earlier work on media in general, which tends to go beyond analyzing media texts and media production and emphasizes the context in which media play a role in people's lives in a holistic way. Here, the complexity, relativism, and situatedness of media practices come alive through the empirical grounding of "intimate methods" (Peterson 2005: 120; see also, for example, Brauchler and Postill 2010; Costa et al. 2022; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002).

Similarly, much of the current literature within social science approaches to "the digital" attributes active appropriation of digital technology to "users," noting that there is nothing inevitable or deterministic about technology (Budka 2019). Often such research presents counterarguments to the pessimistic views expressed in much of the public debate on digital practices. A growing body of research has now contributed to a more nuanced understanding of adolescents' online practices (Archambault 2017; Baym 2015; boyd 2014; Crawford and Robinson 2013; Gasser and Palfrey 2008; Gershon 2012; Ito et al. 2010; Livingstone 2009; Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2020; Schreiber 2020; Slama 2010). In their comparative study, Miller et al. (2016), for instance, turn the narrative of social media as socially disruptive on its head and instead describe *How the World Changed Social Media* by demonstrating how digital practices or the meaning and appropriation of digital spaces vary depending on the social and cultural context they are embedded in. Here, universal users become complex sociocultural actors whose practices defy any attempt to capture them in universal questionnaires, speculation about media effects, or simple explanations. While social media might be used to organize democratic activities in one place, they might be used to surveil and control political opposition in another. As anthropological research indicates, people appropriate technologies and make them their own all over the world, perhaps as tools for sociality rather than isolation when staying in touch with family members in extended families and in the context of transnational migration (Ahlin 2023; Hromadžić and Palmberger 2018; Leurs 2015; Madianou and Miller 2013). People also use them as a liberating tool in conservative settings in which phones provide young women and LGBTQIA+ individuals with sites for safe agency (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007; Willis 1977). Restricted mobility, be it in old age, in the context of disability, or in hospital beds can sometimes be mitigated by expanded possibilities of smartphone-mediated interaction (Ginsburg 2020; Miller et al. 2021). Yet this does not mean that the materiality of media or effects should be sidelined (Postill 2022; Tenhunen 2008). As Jo Tacchi notes, "Media is determined by culture, and at the same time it makes culture" (2012: 238).

This book is primarily situated within digital anthropology, but it also considers extensive work from fields such as media studies, STS, sociology, history, urban studies, human geography, computer science, design, and psychology. It is certainly not an appeal against empirical research into the problematic effects of smartphones and internet use and the experience of compulsion and loss of control among those affected by clinical addiction.[4] Much less is it a declaration that many of the frequently expressed concerns are illegitimate or to be labeled as hysteria. Rather, it is an exploration of the gray area where digital media practices are on the cusp of being defined as problematic. What is interesting here, in particular, is the question: Who has the authority to interpret what is normal or problematic? Can we rely on top-down definitions and arbitrary judgments of what constitutes problematic screen time? And if we do so, what are the consequences? Do we need to examine the underlying assumptions when problematizing and regulating the practices of particular groups, especially given the history of power dynamics and sensationalism in the intersection between youth constructs and media use?

After all, those most vulnerable to smartphone addiction seem to be the disadvantaged groups. Min Kwon et al. (2013), researchers who came up with the smartphone addiction scale (SAS), conclude, for example, that

> people with a low level of education . . . are more likely to become addicted to smartphone use. . . . This may be because people with a low level of education may lack self-control, which has been suggested as a risk factor for game addiction. (6)

Few would deny that life circumstances such as poverty, precarity, discrimination, unemployment, low-quality housing, or poor access to health services contribute to mental health issues for obvious reasons. It is, however, the link between socioeconomic status, low education, and a lack of self-control that sets alarm bells ringing for social scientists, especially given the long history of attributing a lack of discipline, morality, and control to the working class (and youths), as briefly outlined earlier. Such a perspective not only fails to consider complexities of exclusion but also sidelines research suggesting that digital media can particularly benefit marginalized and vulnerable groups (Ito et al. 2010, 2018, 2020).

Such attempts to objectively determine what counts as time (un)well spent are implicitly based on sociocultural norms of competent and healthy engagement with digital media technologies. This can be seen,

for example, in the discourses on digital literacy, when disadvantaged young people are benevolently described as deficient in order to highlight digital divides and inequalities. International surveys in the context of digital literacy emphasize concerns that disadvantaged youths are likely to spend time with "entertainment-oriented" rather than "information-oriented" technologies (van Dijk 2017). Certain so-called active and enabled (Gardner and Davis 2013) digital practices, such as creating a website or posting on social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), are seen to alleviate the new forms of the digital divide and thus encourage social mobility, particularly among marginalized youths (van Dijk 2017). If time is to be spent online, it should ideally happen in healthy and efficient ways, with the right tools for homework and critical thinking rather than passive consumption. One remedy, according to Silicon Valley experts themselves, lies in different technology. An initiative called Time Well Spent was founded in 2013 by Tristan Harris, a former product manager for Google and the co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology. The initiative's name is telling: Time spent with attention-seeking digital devices engineered by the powerful actors of Silicon Valley is not "well" spent. Time must be managed—often with further, optimized technical solutions now induced via ethical rather than purely commercial agendas and often relying on the same kind of gamified design they critique (Beattie and Daubs 2020). At the policy level, such as within the European Union (EU), the rhetoric of active empowerment reflects a similar hope for control. In the EU initiative Better Internet for Children (BIK+), the solution involves not only creating a safer internet (Action Pillar 1) but also empowering and actively engaging children and young people (Action Pillars 2 and 3) (European Commission n.d.). Here, empowerment seems to be a promising remedy against the loss of control if young people just learn enough about the digital worlds.

The solutions to problems associated with the internet, hence, seem to lie in the promise of agency. However, much of the current policy work focusing on digital empowerment and literacy rarely examines the actual social context in which agency is ascribed to and taken away from young people, especially when they appear to be vulnerable, undereducated, and disadvantaged. Although "screen time" seems to be defined primarily as a universal measure of quantifiable units of time, the term hides a multitude of digital activities ranging from scrolling through videos to sending a funny picture to friends, keeping in touch with parents or homelands, or sharing a solution to math homework. Tuning out the world via the screen can be both a consequence and a goal. Empowerment or agency cannot be separated from it, because they are not

neutral concepts. Agency for what? To do what? To do the right thing? But what is the "better thing," the right thing, to do, and who decides that? If young people learn all about data practices, will they still refuse to use a popular social media platform even though everyone else is there? If they learn about the dangers and dark corners of the internet, is that not even more of a reason to go there? Danger can be a place to hide from adults and experiment with bad decisions. I have met young people who might not be able to format a Microsoft Word document, but who have committed credit card fraud on the dark web—using the stolen money to buy crisps at the supermarket. Is this self-determination and empowerment? Does empowerment mean that construction workers, who have no choice but to stick to their precarious, seasonal jobs after leaving a flawed and unjust school system, should optimize their LinkedIn profile? Does empowerment and visibility in digital spaces mean that a child who has suffered a lifetime of xenophobia, racism, or pressure to assimilate suddenly feels comfortable showing their "authentic" self on social media? And what precisely makes time not "well spent" in the context of chronic unemployment?

Wasting Time

"I am simply on the phone . . ." said Marko,[5] an eighteen-year-old student, during an interview at a Viennese school while the voices of his peers could be heard faintly in the background. Marko was describing what he usually does when he is on his smartphone. He continued: ". . . wasting time for nothing really. And I think it's a shame because I could have learned something or done something useful in that time, but it is what it is . . . you get under this spell." This sense of guilt and lost time is certainly not unique to Marko but is familiar to many of the users of digital media technologies whom I encountered during my research between 2018 and 2023. The notion of wasted time is also present in various surveys of young people's use of digital media technology. The representative German JIM (Jugend, Information, Medien) study, conducted annually for over twenty years to date, introduced a question about time wasting for the first time in its 2019 survey. According to their data, 71 percent of those aged twelve to nineteen believed that they "waste their time on apps and online communities" (Feierabend, Rathgeb, and Reutter 2020). The Austrian initiative saferinternet.at conducted a similar (nonrepresentative) survey in 2019, which found that 60 percent of young people aged eleven to seventeen agreed with the statement that they spend too much time online. And a 2018

study by the German Institute for Trust and Security on the Internet (Deutsches Institut für Vertrauen und Sicherheit im Internet; DIVSI) similarly reported that 64 percent of young people aged fourteen to twenty-four (N=576) feel they spend too much time online (2018: 12). In participatory workshops that I conducted with colleagues in Vienna, we also asked school students if they felt they were wasting time online. One participant commented, "Oh yeah, I invest way too much time on YouTube. I waste one hundred percent of my lifetime."

Another added, "Yes, for me, Instagram and YouTube take too much time from me. I think it would be better to do something that would require more creativity. But instead, I do nothing." It is obvious from such studies and responses that the notion of time wasting is also highly prevalent in young people's narratives in Austria.

So how can we explain this apparent contradiction between the perception of wasted time and the enormous popularity of digital practices such as scrolling through images and videos? Can we reconcile previous empirical research on active media users and the widespread assumption that people, especially younger generations, are mesmerized by the irresistible spell of digital media technologies, be they in Ghana (Burrell 2008), Niger (Masquelier 2019), or Austria? And why is the topic of wasting time so omnipresent and persistent? Why, when thinking and writing about media practices, does hardly anyone recount anecdotes from the instances when they did *not* use their smartphones in their everyday lives (except from sporadic, stylized digital detox experiences)? In this book, I approach these questions by examining how these ephemeral digital practices are embedded in the everyday lives of the people I met during my ethnographic research. What do fuzzy practices such as scrolling through endless social media feeds, or "wasting time on nothing," mean at the micro level and beyond spectacular metanarratives? How do these practices play out in everyday life, and what lies behind the "spell" that Marko spoke of?

There will inevitably be ambiguous answers to these questions. Ambiguities are also reflected in studies such as the German Institute for Internet Trust and Safety's 2018 survey in which two-thirds of young people aged fourteen to twenty-four may have agreed that they were wasting time online. However, in the same survey, aptly titled *The Generation Internet: Between Happiness and Addiction*, 69 percent of participants also agreed that the internet makes them "happy" (Deutsches Institut für Vertrauen und Sicherheit im Internet 2018: 12)—a sentiment that makes for less interesting headlines. It is not my intention to reproduce a stereotypical tech industry narrative that celebrates connectivity and progress. Instead, I wish to complicate the black-and-white juxtaposi-

tion of guilt and happiness. Before going into more detail about how I approach these ephemeral practices, I will briefly outline some of the features of time-capturing design built into our devices.

Screens as Captors of Time

The preoccupation with the intertwining of time and technologies is no coincidence, as the exploration of "acceleration" is inextricably linked to technologies that not only seem to profoundly change how time is spent, managed, and prioritized but that are also marketed in terms of speed (Wajcman 2014). Behind these concerns lies an iceberg of industry practices designed to leverage time and to engage and "capture attention," to use the classic terms employed by marketing consultants and the stakeholders in the attention economy (Davenport and Beck 2001) who rely on "persuasive design" (Fogg 2009). Widely read books such as *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products* (Eyal 2014) advise the digital advertising industry on how to act like a predator on a quest to hook the attention of potential "targets" (that is, customers). In contrast to earlier marketing practices that relied on crude demographic data, online spaces have multiplied the ways to target diverse audiences enormously. Echo chambers have allowed parallel worlds to coexist in the same neighborhoods and households, while users spread across the vast internet have become more difficult to "capture" and categorize. These developments also meant that advertisers—or platforms that enable advertising, like Facebook[6]—need to advance their strategies and map out the social spaces in which their customers move. To do this, they collect customer data to understand the habitus of their users and ultimately tap into target audiences to sell advertising space with greater leverage. On Snapchat, a multimedia messaging app, for example, advertisers could preselect potential target groups to whom they would display advertising messages. The categories have long surpassed simple age and gender and now include long lists of categories ranging from "meme watchers" to "high schoolers" or "sharply dressed men." In December 2020, for example, Snapchat's users with a business account could choose between "shopping mall shoppers," "luxury shoppers," or "discount or thrift store shoppers." The personal information that assigns users to the respective categories is collected on the platform itself and shared between websites via browser cookies or app-based advertising IDs.

This intricate collection of information is not only based on data that users actively enter (for instance, likes of specific posts and pages); it also consists of metadata that fills in the information gaps by, for example, drawing inferences from a user's social networks, or capturing the

timing and duration of the user's engagement with specific content, including the exact movements of their fingers (Pavan 2020; Razaghpanah et al. 2018). Our digital devices are designed to constantly leak data, without which the internet would not function (Chun and Friedland 2015). Addressing the uncanny sense that something is continually tracking and watching us, leaking information as we navigate online spaces (Paasonen 2018), media and technology scholars have critiqued the invisible infrastructures beneath the designed surface of such carefully constructed spaces. Harry Brignull (2011), for example, coined the term "dark patterns" to address the aspects of digital design that lead users to take actions contrary to their interests. One example of such dark patterns is the ubiquitous cookie notice designed to make it easier, more convenient, and more attractive for the user to accept it (and thus allow user behavior to be tracked). It contrasts with the inconvenient searching for other options required to opt out. Our gaze is usually drawn to the button that accepts all cookies, while the alternatives remain on the margins of our vision.

Again, screens that persuade, and that capture time and attention are not fundamentally new. The advent of new mass media such as television relied on screens that convert attention into time—the number of viewers who tune in was and still is an essential metric in the television industry. Nowhere is this transaction more visible than in the screens of gambling machines, which offer playful engagement and thrills in exchange for a certain amount of money instantly transferred through physical coins. In casinos, the term "time on device" is used as a concrete metric to estimate the profitability of a gambling machine: Increased time on the device is directly associated with financial gains for the casino (Schüll 2012). Given the commercial importance of screen time (time spent online or on a device) for social media platforms and the accusation of the addictive properties of captivating screens, it is hardly surprising that parallels have been drawn with the gambling industry (Lewis 2017). For example, the anthropologist Natasha Schüll (2012, 2016) describes how the increased and commercially successful reliance on big data and video screens (mainly to appeal to the next generations of gamers) in gambling is historically and geographically linked to general innovations in the design of video games and digital interfaces. After all, designers of digital screens learn from each other and employ similar behavioral models rooted, for instance, in "persuasive design" (Fogg 2009) and "nudging" (Thaler and Sunstein 2009).[7] Comparisons between social media and gambling are sometimes vocally drawn by Silicon Valley developers themselves. The critics gathered in the Center for Humane Technology, for example, view certain design

mechanisms behind social media as either designed to be addictive or maintained precisely because of their addictive qualities. One such example is the pull-to-refresh mechanism invented by Loren Brichter. In a 2017 interview by *The Guardian*, Loren Brichter, a Silicon Valley developer, is quoted as saying that pull to refresh is addictive (Lewis 2017). He developed the feature to refresh his app's feed because he could not find a place for a refresh button. Pull to refresh allowed users to refresh the feed by dragging it down with their thumbs. Twitter (now X) later acquired Brichter's start-up and integrated the feature into the Twitter platform. Nowadays the mechanism is no longer necessary, because pages can be updated automatically. It is still widely used, however—a fact that seemed to puzzle Brichter in an interview with *The Guardian*. For Tristan Harris, former product manager at Google, the reason is the addictive nature of the feature. He said that "each time you're swiping down, it's like a slot machine. You don't know what's coming next. Sometimes it's a beautiful photo. Sometimes it's just an ad" (Lewis 2017). This seemingly simple feature exemplifies how subtle design choices embed addictive rhythms into everyday digital gestures—rhythms that extend beyond pull to refresh to shape the very practices of scrolling, swiping, and interacting with screens more broadly. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate in chapters 4 and 5, cunning marketing practices and persuasive design do not necessarily mean they are perfectly executed, nor that young users are oblivious to them.

Scrolling and Swiping

The mechanical movements of scrolling and swiping may seem inconsequential, but it is here that current technological trends, designer intentions, and business models are translated into embodied practice. Their somewhat rhythmic quality, along with the inevitable joy of social connectedness associated with effortless scrolling and snapping, is an undeniably potent mix. In this sense, scrolling, swiping, but also practices like playing are a lens through which the space between youths and screens comes to life. As anthropologists and ethnographers, we are specialized in seeing more in those moments that might be discarded as trivial. Ethnography, as a methodology that makes sense of the mundane, magnifies those fleeting practices. By doing so, those practices are turned upside down, given color and nuance that gets lost in the colloquial labels of addiction. Through a critical lens, the trivial becomes political and "nothing" becomes meaningful.

These are the kinds of digital practices that filled in the gaps of waiting, distraction, or boredom that accompanied me everywhere during

fieldwork. Young people were regularly scrolling through social media apps like Instagram,[8] swiping through endless feeds of short videos or engaged in short bouts of mobile play. These observations were consistent with a small nonrepresentative survey that I conducted with colleagues in several Viennese schools, in which the students were asked when and where they usually play mobile games. The majority reported that they play mobile games while waiting or during breaks, when they are bored, commuting, before bed, and on the toilet (Göbl et al. 2020). In other words, moments that play along with the "rhythms of everyday life" (Paasonen 2018: 222). This in-betweenness enables copresence, much like the postcard once introduced the in-between of public and private, of "being here and yet there, being present whilst simultaneously absent" (Hjorth 2005; Pink, Horst, et al. 2016). Nowhere and everywhere at once, such practices are both ephemeral and ubiquitous. They are not, however, simply mechanical enablers of movement through spaces and atmospheres. They transcend space as the thumb moves in and across the screen, and yet through them space emerges in the relational process of dwelling. These practices can take place in a concentrated playful experience that lasts for hours or, alternatively, within a few seconds of carelessly scrolling through social media feeds. They can be deeply meaningful or utterly boring. In short, they seem to have little in common beyond representing ways of moving through digital spaces, no less trivial than walking, except that the digital dimension now augments the sidewalk as we walk. Yet this very triviality, as this work seeks to show, is illuminating.

Given the ephemeral nature of such practices, which seem semiconscious, banal, and elusive, it is hardly surprising that they have received little attention from social sciences like anthropology. As Kristian Møller and Brady Robards note, "Small-scale media-body interactions—such as swipes and scrolls—are often left unexplored due to them being between the intent of the user and a measurable action in the interface" (2019: 96). Moreover, these small-scale somatic and digital movements are sometimes too ephemeral, making them difficult to track and archive. They seem to float in the space between users and "measurable intent" (96). Such practices slip into a disciplinary no-man's-land, because precision comes at a price. The closer we investigate digital design, the easier it seems to lose sight of the holistic, "non-digital-centric" approach (Pink, Horst, et al. 2016) that places digital practices in a larger social, cultural, historical, or political context, as is common within social sciences. In that context, scrolling seems oddly mechanical and out of place when divorced from the content fleetingly being flipped through. So how do we go about it?

In the spirit of typical ethnographic research in which the everyday is an essential part of the ethnographic experience, anthropologists studying digital technology have meticulously examined "the everyday" (Pink et al. 2017) and "the intangible" (Pink, Sinanan, et al. 2016) in order to capture the appropriation and integration of digital technology into everyday life. Elsewhere, in their study of cycling and self-tracking, Pink et al. suggest that "by revealing and explaining the routines, contingencies and accomplishments of everyday life as they unfold, we can examine why mundane data matter in their very ordinariness" (2017: 4). The mundane is not defined here in contrast to the spectacular, but rather as "open and leaky" (9), a dynamic site of production for the visible and impactful (Pink et al. 2019: 103). In *Second Life*, for instance, a formerly popular video game that relies on the idea of the "everyday" in its essence, players can select characters, build a house, and interact with others, much like in "real life." Tom Boellstorff (2008) was one of the first to argue in his significant research on *Second Life* that players not only play the game but also inhabit the spaces of their communities as residents participating in neighborhood activities. For players, *Second Life* is not a spectacular or parallel replica of a real world, but an extension of mundane interactions. Rather than only indulging in cybersex and other scandalized activities often reported in the media, much of their activities were the mundane everyday practices of building, trading, or socializing. The microcosm of the smartphone—as a bridge linking the user to a broad spectrum ranging from spectacular Instagram posts, viral moments, massive online events, and rituals to the act of scrolling through social media feeds in a moment of boredom—is no exception. These points on the spectrum can also overlap because a moment of casual scrolling can lead to something more spectacular. Its mobility allows it to become intimately embedded in the mundane routines and acts of care. These everyday care practices, including regular check-ins and the organization of daily life, whether in relation to doing laundry or bringing and picking up family members, are mundane in nature and rarely consist of spectacular acts.

They often remain obscure and implicit, seemingly unworthy of attention; they are seldom mentioned by interlocutors, although they are not necessarily private (Pink et al. 2019: 102–3). For Miller et al. (2021), for example, the success of messenger applications such as WhatsApp lies in the fact that these tools enable trivial daily exchanges among extended family members. Whereas special events such as Christmas holidays and birthdays had a more formal air before the advent of digital messengers, spaces such as WhatsApp enabled more trivial and thus regular exchanges where jokes and photos of meals could be shared

instantly. This mundane entanglement can also provide access to populations for whom participation in public and perhaps more distant or constrained sites of the internet represents a hurdle. In their research with women in India, Radhika Gajjala and Tarishi Verma (2018) argue that low-threshold apps like WhatsApp were crucial in increasing digital participation for women by facilitating private conversations embedded within multiple (transnational) networks while also enabling them to communicate in a more free and expressive manner, choosing with whom to connect. In other words, the digital is quickly becoming the everyday and vice versa (Horst and Miller [2012] 2020b: 29).

This shift toward everyday digital interactions is also reflected in the evolving nature of software distribution, where apps transformed from costly preinstalled programs into accessible, low-cost, and neat, tiny packages seamlessly integrated into daily life. Typically free or inexpensive (unlike the earlier costly software packages), these apps were often unremarkable in themselves, yet they catered to a broad range of everyday needs, from personal organization to niche hobbies like birdwatching (Morris 2018: 93). Jeremy Morris (2018) draws a parallel between the microfunctionalities of apps and the rise of coin-operated vending machines in nineteenth-century England, which filled public spaces, offering trivial commodities ranging from gum to tobacco for impulse purchase. The significance of apps thus lies less in their individual content or design and more in their seamless integration into countless everyday routines and environments (Morris 2018; Morris and Murray 2018). Here is where the mundane becomes political not only because it tells us something about routines or relationships, but also because it is very much a deliberate part of the design. After all, digital design is intent on reducing frictions for the user, becoming seamlessly integrated into those routines and relationships—rarely through sudden disruption, but through one careful, barely noticeable update at a time.

Nonevents

Everyday life is full of seemingly insignificant moments—waiting in line, absent-minded scrolling, a quiet glance at a screen—that often slip past our attention. Yet it's precisely these "in-between" fragments of experience and fleeting pauses that can reveal much more about our engagement with the digital than spectacular digital practices. Guided by the concept of "Non-Events" developed by ethnologists Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren (2010), I turn my gaze to those uneventful, elusive aspects of

life—what is usually brushed aside as trivial or empty time. In *The Secret World of Doing Nothing*—their study of waiting, routines, and daydreaming—Ehn and Löfgren set out to "capture moments not worth paying attention to," and they call these moments "non-events." In doing so, the authors leave aside the "explicit, dramatic and eventful" and focus on the "uneventful, ephemeral, and elusive" to unearth meaning in otherwise unnoticed moments and phenomena that are deemed not worthy of attention (2010: 4). Although the concept is linguistically similar to "non-places" (Augé 1995), it is not concerned with delegitimizing the existence of rich spaces. On the contrary, it sets out to emphasize the richness, situatedness, and historicity behind the apparent triviality. As the authors note, such uneventful events "seem totally devoid of class, hierarchy or marginalization," which makes them fascinating sites of inquiry. Therefore, paying attention to the subtlety of the intangible can help us understand the micropolitics of seemingly apolitical nonevents (Ehn and Löfgren 2010: 214). Throughout this book, I make use of the idea of nonevents to explore how the mundane, everyday interactions young people have with digital media—so often dismissed as unremarkable—reveal the complexities of control, agency, and negotiation that underpin both digital life and broader social dynamics.

The idea of nonevents is a helpful starting point for looking into everyday practices such as scrolling. After all, such "small-scale" (Møller and Robards 2019: 96) digital practices cannot be related or restricted to a particular community, a piece of textual or multimedia content, or specific events. Instead, they are the kind of ubiquitous, in-between nonevents, similar to daydreaming, routines, and waiting, that Ehn and Löfgren (2010) explored in terms of their seeming triviality and social history. Daydreaming, for instance, has been associated with danger throughout Western history. In the European aristocracy, wealthy young women were once feared to be "trapped in the fantasy world, with idleness and boredom as unhealthy platforms for fantasy" (Ehn and Löfgren 2010: 207). At the same time, media such as books and television often played a scapegoating role and were seen as limiting imagination—something that reappeared in anxieties about immersive video games (173). Routines, write the authors, are also not immune to the dangers of idle time. Mass media such as television and radio have historically been considered to be dangerous distractions from ironing or doing homework in the West (107). While the term *multitasking* was only popularized in the first decade of the twenty-first century, alongside debates about stress and burnout (109), public discourses on routines and distractions are often found in the realm of new media and technologies. Indeed, probably never more so than with smartphones, because

they can be carried around, helping people perform routine tasks at any time of day and in any location, including waiting rooms. Waiting is the third type of nonevent Ehn and Löfgren focus on. As the authors point out, "the choreography of waiting is rich" (13), while waiting, and by extension boredom, are also embedded in historical discourses of time and discipline (28). As such, these types of nonevents lie at the analytically rich crossroads of everyday design and social relations, in which waiting and boredom have a broader relevance beyond a simple interpretation as two-dimensional meaningless time spent waiting for the bus. Here, "wasting time" online is transformed from a meaningless, trivial "doing nothing" to a convenient analytical category.

The parallel between waiting, routines, and daydreaming on the one hand, and scrolling or swiping on the other, is hardly coincidental. Throughout the fieldwork, I observed repeatedly how scrolling—sometimes inattentive and repetitive, sometimes focused—is an activity usually embedded in waiting, routines, and daydreaming. As with the nonevents discussed by Ehn and Löfgren (2010), they resemble nondramatic, barely noticeable events that are seemingly not worth paying attention to. A quick scroll through an app is much less visible than the construction of a highly visible online community that catches the eyes of scholars and might be easier to define. By relying on the explicit notion of nonevents, I aim to explicitly highlight the analytical value of such ephemeral moments, rather than merely using them as a springboard to get to the interesting, spectacular events. The concept of nonevents also diminishes the pressure to define and construct "events" in an environment where users constantly switch between online and offline, just as they move in and out of playful and nonplayful spaces. Throughout the fieldwork, engagement with the smartphone was mostly defined by moments of parallel engagement, interruptions, and smooth transitions between platforms and modes of interaction, both online and offline. When my interlocutors talked about smartphone use, they rarely framed it as events—"I was on Instagram" is meaningful, but it is not necessarily an event, nor even a description of dwelling in a particular space. Instead, the smartphone is integrated into everyday life through quick, not always carefully choreographed movements of entry and exit: It is quickly picked up from the table, put away, and used alone, in company, on the bus, on the toilet, or during school lessons. This integration into everyday life is greatly aided by prevailing design choices that allow such activities to be interruptible and resumable (Hjorth and Richardson 2014: 39). Most messenger apps, such as WhatsApp, "remember" what was written after a pause, while mobile games use shorter game intervals and frequent checkpoints to allow

users to pick up later where they left off. The ability to play, type, or scroll for even a few seconds while going to the bathroom makes it a profoundly different kind of event to an hour-long immersive game in a *World of Warcraft* role-playing world with a guild.

Importantly, noneventful does not mean trivial. Looking at digital practices as mundane, banal, incidental, or ephemeral risks sounding pejorative and dismissive, or it risks creating a dichotomy between trivial and meaningful. As the concept of nonevents implies, however, it is not the meaninglessness but the "secret world" behind such practices that makes them an analytically compelling case—especially when triviality is assigned to practices of certain groups. Examples of this underlying assumption can be found not only in historical records of public figures who lament the trivial media consumption of women, children, or the working class, but also in anthropological research. Clifford Geertz, for instance, characterized machine gambling as "mindless" and as associated with women, children, youths, and the poor in contrast to the serious business of cockfighting, which was popular among the "cockfighting men" who he and his wife studied in Bali. Among the "cockfighting men," Geertz sees a profound psychological identification with the "deep play" of cockfighting, an affair he elaborates on affectionately in great detail, while the "shallow play" of money gambling on the periphery of the cockfighting remains invisible and unworthy of his analysis. The "deep play" in his account becomes a nuanced social arena that stands in sharp contrast to other practices that appear one-dimensional and devoid of meaning and that are avoided by the "cockfighting men" as shameful (Schüll 2012).

The emphasis on the mundane and uneventful can be seen as an alternative to the narratives of postmodernism, described as disruptive and characterized by the "rise of individualism and fragmentation of social life" (Ehn and Löfgren 2010: 207). As Ehn and Löfgren note, metanarratives of individualization can appear unbalanced because of the focus on the "dramatic, eventful, and highly visible" (2010: 207). In the trajectories-prone public discourse in the West (Appadurai 2012), the ideally digitally proficient and empowered human features at the pinnacle of the metanarrative of social fragmentation and individualization, without much room for ambiguities and contradictions. When it comes to this kind of individualized, digitally optimized, and networked personhood, much spotlight is placed on highly visible Instagram communities, filters, influencers, fake news, AI technologies, activism, and other apparently more exciting areas of the internet. Focus on the mundane illuminates the other side of the coin: the casual, boring, and un-

eventful moments that are as much a part of a digitalized present and future as are selfies. It joins the quintessential anthropological efforts to bring the diversity of perspectives into the narrative. While doing so, the challenge is not to turn complex social actors into disembodied entities that exist only through social activity. They also interact with intimate material worlds that are deeply ambient, playful, sensory, affective, and enchanting—yet also intertwined with commercial interests and pragmatic design considerations.

Although screens indeed play a central role in this book, I am not writing about screens per se. Like much anthropological work on the digital, the focus begins with the digital but quickly decenters it. What starts with scrolling opens a gateway into the lived realities of young people—their struggles to find a job or apprenticeship, their navigation of pressures and expectations placed on them before adulthood has even begun. Attending closely to their digital practices reveals moments that can be spectacularly boring or surprisingly comforting, yet these everyday interactions also uncover deeper historical and discursive meanings related to boredom, productive time, and the politics of leisure, class, migration, and space. In this way, the monolithic concepts of youth and screens begin to crumble, and the ubiquitous smartphones become a part of everyday struggles, guilty pleasures, and small comforts, rather than a corrupting wave washing over humanity, leaving fragmented selves and social isolation in its wake.

Rather than positioning everyday life as opposed to big tech or industry designers' ambitions, this book will demonstrate how daily routines blend effortlessly with digital flows. Digital environments here are not battlegrounds for activism, empowerment, or constant self-improvement; instead, they hum subtly with casual activity, fleeting boredom, moments of respite, and occasional political indifference. The young people I encountered did not dwell in "unproductive" digital spaces due to lack of skill, ambition, or digital literacy, nor merely as victims of addictive design, but because such engagement reflected what made sense within their particular circumstances. Efforts to frame every digital moment as a site for empowerment or entrepreneurial transformation often miss the comfort, rhythm, and ordinary life that shape most interactions with technology. By focusing on these often-overlooked gestures and routines, I invite readers to see digital engagement as a lived, adaptive part of how young people navigate opportunity, expectation, and constraint within their social worlds. This focus transforms practices that are usually dismissed or ignored into a crucial lens for understanding the subtle complexities of contemporary life.

The Field

The stories, quotes, observations, snippets of conversations, and interactions presented in this book are based on ethnographic fieldwork and participatory design research with young people in Viennese youth centers, schools, and at a government-funded employment lab working with young people in the transition phase between school and work—spaces that will be described further throughout the chapters. These insights, gained through several projects between 2018 and 2023, depended on these institutions and local staff kindly allowing my—frankly not very useful—presence after complying with their respective ethical and institutional procedures. Above all, however, this type of research depended on the openness of young people to share their practices, their concerns, and simply their everyday lives with me—an act of trust that cannot be taken for granted. This trust was sometimes shaken by adults and institutions in their lives, but it was also nurtured by the staff and teachers who engaged in the everyday acts of (often underpaid and undervalued) care, from listening to them to giving improvised haircuts. It is this foundation that allowed me to build trust. This sometimes meant just being with each other, being bored, playing games together, and running workshops. The young people endured pesky questions that covered both their online and offline worlds, allowing curious insights into their digital practices when they saw fit. As a researcher, I became embedded in broader social choreographies of relationality and privacy that included our smartphones. These choreographies also became a source of insight, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3. The smartphone, too, became a research tool as I briefly typed notes and quotes in between conversations, which I then converted into detailed, anonymized field notes and analyzed according to constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). Most of the quotes were reconstructed from memory, although some came from recorded interviews. While recent anthropological research increasingly calls for rethinking the typically automatic tendency to anonymize interlocutors' names (Vorhölter 2021), the high number of minors participating compelled me to consistently replace their names with other similar but common names and change specific details.

The research focused on young people aged fourteen to twenty-one, most of whom were on the cusp between training, apprenticeships, and entering the labor market. The individuals and groups who participated in the study did not belong to a particular "community" such as online gamers or advocates of the quantified self, measuring their steps or calories. Nor did they belong to the visible world of influencers, as my in-

terlocutors had little in common with this very public and exposed field, even if they were sometimes its spectators. Instead, they were ordinary young people experiencing the various difficulties and joys of growing up. This book is therefore a bricolage that attempts to illuminate how time is "spent" in a variety of contexts and at the micro level, rather than speculating on what the ideal of "time well spent" might look like—within and beyond the digital.

Importantly, however, some of my interlocutors would be positioned on the losing side of a digital divide, with "deficient" digital skills and seemingly limited digital literacy—a framing I critique in this book (chapter 2). What was common to a majority (although not all) of my interlocutors because of the choice of research sites was the social and economic conditions that considerably affected their lives, future imagination, and inevitably their digital experience: from chronic waiting and boredom to precarity and migration. Most of the research was conducted with young people from migrant backgrounds, from low-income families and with young people with lower formal education, but also with those who, for various reasons, including mental health, experienced problems in the transition phase between school and work or apprenticeship. Two youth centers, for instance (which formed my most important field sites), were selected as playful recreational sites that could provide a safe space for interaction with mostly underage youths, many of whom were regular visitors. Once in the field, however, the themes of unemployment, waiting, and difficulties with social mobility began to dominate conversations, inspiring analytical categories that inevitably became an essential layer of the narrative presented here. Youth centers are city-funded leisure spaces open to all children and young people under the age of nineteen, and I visited them weekly in 2018 and 2019. Most of the visitors had migration experiences in their biographies, either their own or those of their parents, who had immigrated from Turkey, the former Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Syria, and others. Austria has a long and dynamic history of immigration—partly due to ties dating back to the Habsburg Empire that encompassed several countries from the region (sometimes more, sometimes less voluntarily).

Once an imperial monarchy, Austria became a republic after World War I and a sovereign state after the Nazi dictatorship. Since the 1960s, labor migration increased as mostly unskilled "guest workers" from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia were actively recruited by Austria to fill positions in the construction, textile, paper, and tourism sectors. Their presence played a crucial role in shaping both the economic success and social life of the country, leaving a particularly strong imprint on

Vienna, where migrants have significantly influenced the city's urban and social landscape (Palmberger 2019). Vienna began to transform into a multilingual city connected to the global flows of migrants, asylum seekers, and students that it is today, with the last major arrival of asylum seekers occurring in 2015 and 2016 (Karasz 2018). The newcomers populated both old working-class neighborhoods that offered cheap subsidized housing and several parks dotted around these areas. The anthropologist Danila Mayer argues in her ethnography of Vienna's "park youth" that the parks, referred to as *Beserlparks* in German, were a focal point for newcomers in search of public spaces they could claim as their own (2011: 78). My findings echo Mayer's insights, but link such politics of space with now-effortless and accessible digital hangouts (see chapter 8).

Perhaps one of the reasons why these stories resonated with me was my own previous experience of migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Germany as a teenager. Aspects of my own biography certainly played a role in empathizing with the struggles in the many layers of "foreignness," exclusion, social mobility, and the related challenges that some of the youths faced. Acknowledging this affective entanglement, however, helps diffuse the opposing dichotomy of the researcher and the interlocutor (Stodulka 2016) and reminds us that the affective dimensions of fieldwork are not a disturbance present within the data, but an intrinsic part of being in and relating to the field (Lubrich and Stodulka 2019; Stodulka, Dinkelaker, and Thajib 2019). Additionally, although all the data were anonymized, I have chosen not to write up the most personal experiences shared with me during fieldwork, out of consideration for the mostly underage youths who were familiar with my role but may not have always understood its extent. After all, with fieldwork intimacy comes ethical responsibility (Stodulka 2021: 93).

It is perhaps also my own experience that makes me adamant to avoid framing young people from disadvantaged contexts in terms of deficits, thus essentializing the differences between "poor" and "rich" children (Ito et al. 2010) while also highlighting precarity and very real inequalities that cannot be glossed over. A similar case can be made in regard to migration. Here I follow scholars (Çağlar 2016; Glick Schiller 2018; Ramsay 2020) who argue that the tendency of anthropologists to construct clear boundaries between migrants and nonmigrants not only "others" migrants, who are then denied a dynamic temporality (Fabian [1983] 2014), but also overlooks the precarity (Tsing 2015) inherent in the neoliberal restructuring of urban life among migrants and nonmigrants alike, in both the so-called Global North and the Global South. Instead of generalizing about migrant, marginalized, or disadvantaged

youths,[9] the book aims to do justice to the idea that ethnographic research consists of situated "partial truths" (Pool 1991) that are interrupted and supplemented by insights from various settings.

That said, the (digital) experiences of many of my interlocutors were deeply shaped by citizenship regimes and long-standing dynamics of othering and exclusion. For example, extended time online sometimes stemmed from prolonged unemployment, itself a result of limited social mobility or discrimination against certain ethnic or racialized groups within the labor market. Illegal digital activities that arose from the playful passing of time online could also carry greater risks for asylum-seeking youths, for whom minor infractions could result in severe legal or bureaucratic consequences. As a member of the EU, Austria is embedded in a migration system that privileges most EU citizens with freedom of movement, residence, and work, while positioning migrants from outside the EU—often racialized or Orientalized—as outsiders subject to greater precarity. Similar hierarchies are also part of Austria's history as a former empire, where imperial distinctions between the German-speaking center and the eastern peripheries (including the Balkans at times) cast the latter as lesser Europeans, frequently characterized by stereotypes of backwardness and violence: a view later codified within Aryan Nazi ideology, which deemed Eastern Europeans racially inferior. Such historical legacies also mean that migrants from (South) Eastern Europe, still perceived as not fully European, may sometimes become complicit, willingly or not, in reproducing global racial hierarchies that simultaneously diminish their own status (Krivonos 2023).

Furthermore, Austria's national identity is profoundly shaped by its historical self-image as the frontier between East and West, a narrative largely rooted in its key defensive role during the Turkish sieges of Vienna in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Throughout Vienna, plaques, monuments, and art in parks, historic buildings, and museums commemorate the city's resistance against Ottoman expansion into Western and Northern Europe, embedding this memory deeply into the urban landscape and collective consciousness. Adding to this complexity, the majority of immigrants in Austria (excluding Germans) come from former Yugoslavia and Turkey. The long-standing historical entanglements among these groups—shaped by the Ottoman Empire's centuries-long rule over Balkan territories and the subsequent ethnic and religious conflicts—also infuse contemporary social relations with layers of historical memory and tension. Within this context, simplistic notions of majority and minority fall short. Vienna exemplifies a dynamic urban environment where social housing is interspersed amid affluent neighborhoods, and where young people of migrant backgrounds frequently

form significant portions, and sometimes even the majority, in public schools. According to the City of Vienna statistics, 34 percent of the Viennese population did not own Austrian citizenship in 2023 or were born outside of Austria, while half the population had a migration background ("Integration and Diversity Monitor 2023" 2023).[10] Such demographic realities further blur the lines of clear-cut social and ethnic divisions, making the city a complex mosaic that challenges conventional separations of belonging and "otherness."

Although my analytical framing neither foregrounds socioeconomic disadvantage nor migration specifically, it does dive into the matter-of-fact inequalities I encountered. I build on the framing by media anthropologists Sahana Udupa and Max Kramer (2023), who argue that people do not interact with online spaces as abstract technological entities or isolated communication channels; rather, they engage with "multiple interfaces" where migration, the nation-state, citizenship, and other structures of authority intersect and converge. This will become particularly visible when young people enter the labor force carrying the burden of socially segregated public schooling, which is rarely socially porous, while facing and navigating uncertain futures. The borrowed notion of multiple interfaces allows for not dividing groups into migrants, asylum seekers, ethnic groups, or social classes. Instead, it examines dynamic socioeconomic conditions and historical dynamics that affect how, where, and when young people dwell online—and how these practices are interpreted by a wider society.

The anthropological view of digital media technologies, as with technology in general (Chevron 2011), has long been dominated by the notion that technologies are a product of social and cultural activities and that media exist through situated practices (Ramella et al. 2017: 7). As Pink and Horst et al. point out in "Digital Ethnography", such an approach is based on the premise that the digital should be understood as "*part* of something wider" (2016: 11), rather than "something out there" (Ardèvol and Lanzeni 2016: 448) to be studied as an isolated cultural phenomenon. The smartphone is also a place to be: "Ich bin am Handy" is German for "I am on the phone." Digital media technologies are not only a means of communication but also a dwelling in which one can develop a "sense of habitation" (Møller and Robards 2019) and an intimate "co-presence" (Hjorth and Richardson 2014). This "environment" includes bodies intertwined with screens, audiovisual stimuli, vibrations, tactile, and often playful experiences of being in the world. Through this lens, text and content, which are usually at "the heart of media analysis" (Peterson 2005: 22), move into the background. But they are no more or less present than other "content" that young people

are confronted with beyond the digital. Online and offline spaces have thus been seen as overlapping spaces of sociality and not as separate, artificially delineated fields of inquiry. Nor have online and offline spaces been conflated, as the deliberate blurring of such boundaries is particularly important from a design perspective and deserves to be closely examined (Bareither 2017; Boellstorff 2020; Nardi 2015).

Therefore, terms such as online or digital and offline or nondigital are used in this book in their literal, descriptive sense, with online and offline being seen as co-constitutive realms of reality. While the research began offline—through classic participant observation—"the digital" was an inherent and overlapping layer of all interactions, interwoven with everyday life and the emerging relationships in the field. This framing aligns with what scholars have called postdigital reality (G. Coleman and Jandrić 2019) in which such a distinction would miss the point not only analytically but also empirically speaking, as I will argue throughout the book. Because of ethical considerations and the access granted through institutions, and mainly because of my interlocutors' young age,[11] I did not shadow them or follow them online by invisibly observing their online practices. The youth centers and schools were regulated spaces where a continual visible and verbally negotiated researcher presence could be established, with consent ensured dynamically as part of an ongoing process.

Although various digital media technologies play a role in this book, I have paid particular attention to smartphones and apps, especially the most popular (at the time of research) social media platforms among young people in Austria, such as Instagram and Snapchat. These spaces were generally navigated by scrolling—a central theme in this book, but one that transcends platforms and applications. The fleeting, rapid up-and-down movements of the thumb are common to many overlapping online spaces of the smartphone, as you navigate effortlessly between apps and content. But scrolling inevitably shares the limelight with swiping, sending messages or pictures, or playing games. There's a reason for not isolating one platform, practice, or device: The changing landscape of games and casual play now includes not only games in the narrow sense but also a diverse range of playful and creative activities that transcend devices and genres within "app-based ecologies" (2014: 26) or what Urte Undine Frömming et al. (2017) might call "digital environments." The authors define this as "the conglomeration of technologies, events and realities that interpenetrate each other, sometimes co-constitute each other" (2017: 13). Instead, practices such as scrolling or gaming are part of broader digital mechanisms or best practices in digital design that apply across platforms. These terms refer to common

industry practices and include the basic functions and appearance of apps and devices on the one hand, and concepts and models that motivate designers' decisions on the other.

In addition to ethnographic fieldwork, the foundations of this book are also rooted in participatory and interdisciplinary research in two projects with the aim of codesigning a serious game (Göbl et al. 2021) and an app (Jovičić et al. 2025). Whereas ethnographic research allows for in-depth insights into the more-than-digital big picture, participatory design workshops allow for a more creative, haptic exchange with research participants, through codesign sessions, film creation, drawings, prototypes, excursions, or group discussions—and provocative interventions when discussions stalled (Jovičić, Göbl, and Hristova 2021). Moreover, being part of the design process and looking behind the scenes of design made me aware of the ambiguities inherent in the design process, as well as in relation to the black-and-white narratives that are often reproduced in the public imaginaries of predatory online spaces. Although this work is not about screens, understanding the relevant design trends, ideas, and practices behind these screens—such as mechanics, apps, and games—is crucial so as not to exclude an essential part of the picture.

These field sites and foci will be developed throughout the book as it weaves together the three interlinked strands. The first part begins by outlining the specific social and political conditions in which digital practices are embedded. This includes zooming out from everyday mundane practices like scrolling to reveal the broader picture, including schooling, employment, and concerns about the future. I start by examining the social context of digital practices with a particular focus on (digital) inequalities and topics related to the digital divide (chapter 2), followed by a look into the subtle social choreographies that unfold in daily interactions with friends, family, and the wider world while also exploring dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, or gender (chapter 3). Chapter 4 focuses specifically on the experiences of waiting and boredom, illustrating how precarity intertwines with digital practices. The second strand centers on digital design and how youths negotiate it, highlighting its porous and effortless qualities (chapter 5) as well as its playful aspects (chapter 6). Finally, the third part explores the space and time regimes that shape young people's lives. Chapter 7 focuses on time by critically examining the question of wasted time and societal notions of productivity, whereas chapter 8 culminates in a theorization of space that considers how young people's rootedness in physical environments affects (the perception of) their online dwelling. Chapter 9 draws these three strands together, offering concluding remarks on

how discourses linked to digital practices and digital personhood are entangled with digital design and physical environments.

Notes

1. Here I follow Jenna Burrell (2012: 29), who in her ethnography with youths in Ghana asked: "if the internet was the answer, what was the question?" based on a similar question posed by Maria Bakardjieva and Richard Smith (2001).
2. Beate Lang, "Comics und die Bibliothek: Zum Beginn einer späten Freundschaft? Das Comic als Forschungsgegenstand und seine Stellung innerhalb des wissenschaftlichen Bibliotheksbetriebs" (MA diss., Universität Wien in Kooperation mit der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, 2013), 89–90.
3. A social media platform based on short-form video content.
4. In fact, my own follow-up research looks at smartphone and internet addiction.
5. All names of interlocutors mentioned in this book have been changed to protect their privacy. The quotes were originally in German, and I have translated them.
6. A social media and social networking service.
7. Drawing on models in motivational psychology, the term "nudging" was defined in 1975 as a way to influence human behavior without involving external or negative consequences and instead relying on voluntary decisions. The concept has been used in game design and apps to improve usability and predictability and to gently persuade the player or user to follow the designers' intended instructions.
8. A social media platform focused on sharing photos and short-form videos.
9. Given a lack of suitable alternatives, the terms "marginalized" or "disadvantaged" are occasionally used to signal systemic mechanisms of socioeconomic, discriminatory, and cultural exclusion. The term in no way implies that the subjective experience of my research partners included the same marginal experiences or fixed attributes, nor that these young people were on the periphery of society at large. Rather, the term attempts to highlight social inequalities and specific challenges that are not always relevant to the urban, cosmopolitan elites who tend to shape the narratives of digitalization.
10. The term "migration background" is a concept commonly used in German-speaking countries to describe individuals who either have immigrated themselves or have at least one parent who immigrated. It captures the idea of a migratory family history, often regardless of whether the person was born in the country or not.
11. When introducing myself to new youth center visitors, and to students and young participants in the employment lab, I explained my role as a researcher, sometimes comparing my job to that of a journalist conducting interviews, as *researcher* was rarely a familiar category. I always ensured verbal (and in the case of recorded interviews, written) consent. None of the activities were carried out without making my role and research activities transparent.

CHAPTER 1

(Digital) Inequalities

Introduction

When you enter the Viennese youth centers at the center of my fieldwork, the experience is a multisensory one. Depending on the time of day and the age groups allowed in the space, you may encounter the excited screams of younger children running around the sofas that give the communal space a living room feel. Or, once the older youths enter, you might hear teenagers listening to Viennese hip-hop or Turkish pop music, usually relaxing on the sofas, their gaze fixed on their smartphones. Sometimes the steam and smell of Turkish chai envelop the "bar" area, where soft drinks are sold and free snacks are prepared. Over time, I got to know some of the regular visitors well, while others came and went—some I saw every few months, others only once. Since I was not a permanent staff member, trust had to be rebuilt each week. Visitors could only compare me to the occasional interns, who were part of the ever-changing social landscape, despite my repeated attempts to clarify my role as a researcher—a job description that rarely made sense to them. This implicit conflation of the roles of being an ethnographer or researcher or a not-further-defined staff member was not ideal since the roles differed: The staff had an underlying pedagogical agenda, while I was interested in listening rather than giving advice (see also Brocco and Rutert 2019)—this, however, did not negatively impact my relationship to the visitors, who could turn to trained staff for advice if needed. The interns, who sometimes worked at the youth center during their social work training or community service, would eventually disappear, making only fleeting appearances in the lives of the young people who may have known some of the permanent staff their entire lives. Our names would eventually fade, making them hardly worth remembering.

Marco, a twenty-two-year-old avid gamer who was only allowed to visit once a month because of his age, solved the problem of forgetting my name by calling me the "Internet Woman" (die Internet Frau).

These youth centers, located throughout Vienna, are distinctly playful, noncommercial spaces created for hanging out and spending free time. Most centers offer table football, ping-pong, PlayStation corners, and sometimes rooms for sports, parties, and simple audiovisual production studios. They are integrated into the local community by offering language classes and cooking events for adult women and renting out the sports area for outside classes—either for free or in exchange for organizing a dance class for youth center visitors. In the centers, the living room area generally dominates, consisting of mostly donated, eclectic sofas of various shapes, sizes, and colors. Arranged in a circle, they encourage social interaction. Staff usually mingle with visitors by hanging out on the sofas and at the bar, or by initiating various activities. Such activities might include a table football tournament or a game of UNO cards and are voluntary, with visitors free to join in and drop out at any time. The walls are usually plastered with posters and images indicating that the space is playful, shared, participatory, and nondiscriminatory. In addition to the names and pictures of visitors and reminders of creative activities and group outings, the walls also display ideological messages that promote diversity and women's rights and condemn homophobia. The meaning and visibility of the symbolic references scattered on the walls would change in line with global trends. When the issue of homophobia emerged in the narrative of the Chechen Republic's then-president Ramzan Kadyrov, who claimed that LGBTQIA+ people do not exist in his country, several youths attacked the LGBTQIA+ posters at the center. After being replaced several times and forming the subject of lengthy discussions between staff and visitors, the posters were soon forgotten and ignored most of the time. Just before local and national elections, mementos of political trivia games or the main messages of participating political parties would mark the space.

The youth centers' objective, usually associated with social housing, is to provide a free, open, and safe space for the local community. Youth organizations, the precursors of such youth centers, began to emerge in Vienna between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Wächter 2006). In addition to nationalist and often all-German youth centers that celebrated the idea of "home" (*Heimat*) with trips to the Alps, such organizations increasingly coalesced with emerging political movements. Alongside religious and nationalist movements, socialist and left-wing groups emerged—a process that continued into the twentieth century and is visible today in the strong presence of youth sections

of the popular parties in Vienna's political landscape (Wächter 2006). The parent organization behind the two youth centers that formed my main field sites currently operates several youth centers throughout Vienna. Their website presents their organization as free of political and religious ideologies and emphasizes openness to local youths, regardless of their origin or gender orientation. Nevertheless, youth centers do not necessarily operate in an ideology-free realm. First, they are associated with social housing for low-income residents. Second, the youth centers are funded by the city of Vienna—a city ruled by the Social Democrats with a relative majority since the Red Vienna period. As a result of the party's continual efforts to avoid selling housing and to construct new projects, Vienna's cityscape today is not characterized by divisions into clear-cut affluent neighborhoods or the so called no-go areas, because the socioeconomic groups were intentionally mixed by the city administration throughout the century. Although there is usually a high concentration of social housing projects or heightened criminality and drug activities in certain areas, such activities sometimes cut through more affluent parts of the city as well. Affordable and subsidized social housing, along with youth centers and social welfare programs, such as summer camps for economically disadvantaged children, continue to shape the cityscape, which remains under the governance of the Social Democratic Party despite the rise in conservative and right-wing political forces at the federal level (de la Riva 2018). Indeed, this trend was a matter of concern among the staff, who occasionally discussed it during their cigarette breaks.

The staff come from various backgrounds and include those who have retrained from other professions, such as the service industry, and who are not necessarily classically trained social workers. Their role description, *Betreuer*, means "caretaker" in German. They not only manage the space (which includes introducing, facilitating, and promoting social games, encouraging activities, keeping inventories, managing food donations, and cooking); they also advise on housing, education, and employment issues or serve as personal confidants. Since most of the visitors have an immigrant background or are asylum seekers, the staff also do translation work, not only literally but also bureaucratically and institutionally. Before and after the fixed times when the space is open for children and young people, they hold meetings. There, the team shares news and planned activities and discusses general concerns as well as action plans to support individuals. They give educational advice, refer youths for help, and sometimes offer support during court proceedings or—no less dramatically—when legal problems need to be conveyed to parents. Perhaps their most notable contribution is the long process of

gaining visitors' trust by being supportive and protective confidants with whom the youths feel they can discuss school problems, smoking, drugs, and other activities that parents might sanction.

The space is not only a playful and supportive space but also one that allows access to the internet. The youth centers offer in-house Wi-Fi that allows those without a mobile data plan to access the internet. This reliance on public Wi-Fi left many youths without free internet access when the COVID-19 lockdown measures led to the closure of Viennese institutions and businesses. For those without internet access at home, school and job searches were particularly difficult (Goldenberg and Wittstock 2020). In general, the availability of an internet connection could motivate visitors to come to the centers, while the lack of a stable connection could lead them to a nearby McDonald's instead. In terms of physical infrastructure, the youth centers provided a PlayStation and a Nintendo Wii console. Computers were nonexistent in one center and consisted of two outdated devices in the other, one of which barely worked and every now and then inspired fits of rage after crashing repeatedly.

During one of the slow days at the youth center, I met Faro, a young man who had come to seek help with writing a job application.[1] His story revealed not only the importance of social relationships and institutions like the youth center in the long and complicated process of accessing work, but also that digital practices cannot be separated from the broader social inequalities.

Digital Divide

Faro was an eighteen-year-old young man who has lived in Austria since emigrating from Ghana as a child with his mother and brother. When I first met him, he had just completed his vocational training as a painter and facade builder. On this occasion, he came to the youth center to ask for help in writing job applications, since he had no computer at home and had never written an application before. We sat down at the computer, while I retrieved the templates staff members had prepared on the youth center computer. Soon, however, I noticed that Faro started tapping his foot on the floor and becoming distracted when I tried to ask him questions about a job he was seeking. Sensing his frustration, I inquired about his reluctancy to write job applications. "Why?" I asked him, while googling construction companies.

"Because I hate my job. I hate doing it, it's bullshit," Faro replied.

Startled, I asked, "Why did you choose the apprenticeship in the first place then?"

He said, "My mother pushed me to find something, and this is what I could get." Faro's German was fluent, but he had a criminal record and, as it turned out, writing skills and grammar that would have barely sufficed for a job application. He was also visibly overwhelmed with the basic commands of the word processing software, including saving and copying files in the folder on the computer. Once I started writing the words we agreed on, he seemed surprised by the (from my perspective, mediocre) speed of my writing while I helped him formulate and write the applications. My attempts to find out what his career interests were—to direct the application to the appropriate company—kept leading nowhere: "I don't know what I want to do. They told me to send it somewhere, so I will send it somewhere." This is when I realized what was going on: The employment agency (AMS—Arbeitsmarktservice) required him to send a certain number of job applications per month to continue receiving social welfare—a task that inspired little enthusiasm in him for obvious reasons. It was, however, a task that he needed to do without the appropriate resources. We continued to engage in what increasingly seemed like the pointless bureaucratic task of sending applications to random companies he did not want to work for. Both Faro and I became increasingly frustrated with this task. For me, the frustration of this Sisyphean act was just the first taste of the endless loop of being stuck in a place with no way forward or back.

During my fieldwork, I encountered young people with no PCs, laptops, or internet at home—youths for whom access to the internet meant relying on public Wi-Fi. The consequences of reduced computer ownership were particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures in 2020 and 2021. For some school students, the shift to homeschooling that required PCs and a stable Wi-Fi connection meant that some became unable to attend class (Tóth, Motter, and Horaczek 2020). For those not attending school, the closure of social services or even the local McDonald's meant that their search for apprenticeships and jobs was hampered not only by the pandemic in the economic sense but also by their inability to write job applications. Several youth center staff reported that teenagers and young adults asked them how to write job applications on their smartphones during the lockdown. Apart from these exceptional circumstances, for young people in transition between school and apprenticeship or higher education, hindered access to digital infrastructure in general hampers the writing of job applications—be it the lack of functioning PCs, accessible Wi-Fi, free and accessible word processing software, or even the ability to access, write, and manage emails and attachments. Such now-digitalized formalities are important in this highly bureau-

cratic country where (at least officially) jobs are accessed through formalized procedures.

Faro's story inspired a later project named We:Design, which I co-led with visual anthropologists and computer scientists (Jovičić et al. 2025). We explored the circumstances surrounding the practice of applying for jobs, particularly in relation to digital aspects of the process. The project included film workshops and filmmaking, participatory design workshops, and interviews with participants in the employment lab, including trainers (training the participants in a particular skill) and coaches (providing personal coaching). One of the outcomes was a free, open access, ad-free, low-threshold application for writing job applications on a smartphone, without the need for complex digital skills, an internet connection, or the costs associated with owning (and maintaining) computers and word processing software. We involved young people as experts in almost every part of the app's design (name, logo, features, interface design, process logic, user experience) while also addressing barriers to digital employment and building their confidence in developing their skills. Nevertheless, it was crystal clear that an app could not solve the underlying problems of digital inequality. Looking at the actual process of writing a job application illustrates why such a practice takes place beyond technologies, although technologies and the barriers they present certainly affect the process (hence the reason we invested resources in developing the app). The lack of access to technology is real. But when we looked at access to technology, the first thing we noticed were social, community-based networks around technology.

Some research participants mentioned family members (like a grandmother with a computer at home) or institutions where they would go to access computers. But social support goes beyond access to digital equipment itself and takes place before a word is written. As my interlocutors mentioned, they generally preferred to seek support, regardless of their access to digital equipment and especially at the beginning of the application process. They turned to teachers, parents, friends, institutions, or, more generally, "someone who speaks good German." In fact, one of the most requested features for the app, even among native speakers, was a spelling and grammar checker. There were likely reasons for this reliance on social support, as opposed to, for example, googling application templates—which was only mentioned by a handful of participants. This reliance was mainly due to insecurities, particularly anxiety about the unfamiliar application process with such weight and potential consequences—sometimes the first experience of its kind. Even those who had practiced writing applications in school found that they had long forgotten about it after practicing it once.

Alongside widespread concerns about language and spelling, some were also anxious about formatting, suggesting the easily overlooked insecurities about the "structure and appearance" of documents in global literacy discourses (Abou Moumouni and Krauß 2023: 96). Most commonly, they reported being overwhelmed by the uncertainty of the unknown process: having an appropriate, high-quality photo, sharing enough personal details without giving too much away, meeting deadlines, or knowing how to write emails. But many also feared not being good enough, not presenting themselves well enough, not saying the right thing in the right way and ultimately being rejected. These fears went straight to their core. For some, these fears not only led to "overthinking," as one participant put it, but also to procrastination and motivation problems. As one of the lab trainers noted, overcoming these fears is a long process for some of the participants, requiring presence, confidence, and patience, especially for those already struggling with the transition phase:

> For some it is frustrating, but when it is possible to sit down with us and get help, then . . . it just needs an impulse, it just needs this encouragement, being present. For some, it's also about being reminded to do it. Many people are sooo afraid of dealing with the topic of applications, creating an application. Because some sit there for weeks. So we ask: Have you got your text now? Do you have your letter of motivation?

Once again, we are reminded that mere access to technology is only part of the problem—as the literature on the digital divide has made clear in recent decades (Jovičić 2024).

This issue of access to digital technologies has become widely known as the "digital divide." After the initial wave of novelty and optimism that accompanied the early days of cyberspace, the 1990s brought a shift in optimistic narratives surrounding the new technology and its inclusiveness. From the ashes of dashed hopes for a better world, with trust and password-free accounts, emerged concerns about the darker and exclusionary side of the internet. The binary term "digital divide" initially stood for the global disparities between people with and without access to digital infrastructures. As global access to broadband internet and affordable devices increased, concerns about their efficient use also expanded. In the early years of the twenty-first century, scholars increasingly called for a better distinction between pure access to the internet and the various skills needed to navigate the internet (Hargittai 2002; Scheerder, Van Deursen, and van Dijk 2017; van Dijk 2017). With time, discourses began to point out how preexisting inequalities were repro-

duced and reinstated in the context of digital technologies (Blank and Lutz 2018; Helsper 2012; Micheli, Lutz, and Büchi 2018). Scholars now took a holistic approach toward examining the concrete consequences of restricted internet use rather than focusing on abstract dichotomies (Donner 2015; van Dijk 2017). While early debates on the digital divide emphasized macro-issues of mere access, ignoring the micropolitics of the "digital," more recently, anthropologists and other scholars have highlighted the different dimensions of "digital inequalities" and "digital inclusion" to develop a more nuanced approach to power relations within the digital sphere. Scholarship in this area warns of the dangers of instrumentalizing technology in developmental policies in the Global South and emphasizes the entanglements of the digital with class, religion, and politics in different social and cultural contexts (Archambault 2017; Arora 2019; Barendregt 2020; Burrell 2008; Byrne, Winarnita, and Herriman 2019; Donner 2015; Omari 2018; Poggiali 2016; Slama 2021; Uimonen 2015).

While affluent countries like Austria exhibit almost total smartphone and internet penetration, especially among younger generations, a closer look reveals persisting inequalities (Jovičić 2024). The authors of a 2016 study (based on surveys and focus groups) by the Austrian Chamber of Labor conclude that a digital divide still seems to run along socioeconomic divides (Ikrath and Speckmayr 2016). While smartphone ownership was similarly prevalent across the board, the researchers found that Wi-Fi connection and computer ownership were still more common in the households of youths with higher formal educational backgrounds. Consequently, the use of computers for nonentertainment tasks, such as school and homework, was less widespread. In addition, youths from low-income families appear to be underserved when it comes to digital literacy opportunities (Ikrath and Speckmayr 2016). Yet, the authors also emphasize that the problems do not lie in access to digital technologies per se, but in the fact that youths with higher formal educational background tend to receive more support at home and use those technologies more frequently for school-related tasks (40 percent among those with a higher educational background, compared with 15 percent among others). At the same time, the schools rarely compensate for these differences, mainly due to their inability to provide adequate support in digital matters or the lack of fixed curricula across schools.

One of the first efforts to alleviate the digital divide was the introduction of systematic digital literacy programs in the Austrian school curriculum. The digital literacy program Digitale Grundbildung was incorporated into the national curriculum in 2018 and made mandatory. Since then, teachers have been expected to cover wide areas of

digital literacy—from researching information to protecting privacy online. These changes, however, have come with few resources—training, fears, generational divides, and similar barriers lead to a big question mark over how far-reaching such reforms actually are. Teachers were expected to take a top-down approach to teaching "digital literacy," including topics they were often less familiar with than the students they were teaching. The curriculum has done little to address the problem of the lack of physical infrastructure. In various research projects I have been involved with in Austria, it has become clear how vastly different the infrastructure can be between schools—from schools with no Wi-Fi or power sockets in the classroom, to schools where any kind of digital technology is banned, to schools where laptops are provided for all children. Private specialized courses, such as the workshops offered by the EU-funded saferinternet.at initiative, require a financial (albeit symbolic) investment, which makes them accessible mainly to schools with private funding, for example, through parents' associations. This circumstance ultimately means that this kind of expertise is mainly accessible to students who attend wealthier and more prestigious schools and to those who stay in the school system instead of leaving it for vocational training. So far, it is safe to say that curricular interventions alone are unlikely to level the playing field.

Deficiencies

A common thread running through the hopes for empowerment associated with digital literacy measures such as Digitale Grundbildung is the concern that insufficient digital literacy leads to reduced social mobility. Conversely, this implies that the opposite is true—sufficient digital literacy leads to increased social mobility. In the study by the Austrian Chamber of Labour, for example, young people who are "left behind" use digital technologies less "to achieve personal goals at school and at work" (Ikrath and Speckmayr 2016: 18). According to the study authors, young people from less formally educated backgrounds appear to lag behind their peers in almost all types of digital activities considered active—for example, in setting up a website, using an ad blocker, posting informational content on Twitter (now X), and so on. In contrast, their more privileged peers appear to use the internet in a way seen as more creative and diverse (Ikrath and Speckmayr 2016). This conclusion mirrors the global studies summarized by van Dijk (2017). Much of the literature on the digital divide shows that "people with higher education are significantly using the advanced applications of digital media for capital-enhancing goals relating to work, career, and study

while people with lower education are using the simple applications of entertainment, commerce, and messaging" (van Dijk 2017: 8). Similarly, the initial legislative document introducing Digitale Grundbildung described digital competencies as key to using the internet as a productive, useful resource: "As part of basic digital education, students are taught all the skills they need in order to use technologies consciously, productively, and reflectively for their own further development or to gain a foothold in promising occupational fields (Schule.at 2018, my translation)."

For some scholars, proactive smartphone use extends beyond school. For example, the educational scholars Howard Gardner and Katie Davis (2013) argue that some members of the "App Generation" tend to be either "app-dependent" and thus more passive, mainly focusing on visuals, music, chatting, or "app-enabled" and therefore more proactive and creative. Their book explores how digital technology both enhances and constrains identity, relationships, creativity, and imagination compared with the predigital era. The work is a call to encourage more self-determined use of digital technologies rather than consumption of others' designs. In principle, this is a noble endeavor. Such a distinction between active and passive engagement with digital technology presupposes, however, that the active and therefore productive use of digital technologies is superior regardless of the context. Such dichotomies are historically rooted in the problematic differentiation between "information elite" and the "entertainment proletariat" (Götzenbrucker and Franz 2010: 63). In the Red Vienna of the early twentieth century, as we have seen, the emerging political elites viewed the leisure-oriented programming of radio and television with suspicion. Fritz Rosenfeld, an Austrian author, complained in 1929 in *Der Kampf* (the Social Democrats' magazine) that films and sporting events seemed more important than the broadcasting of a parliamentary session in which relevant laws were being passed. Even the cinema run by the workers was occasionally met with disdain, as the politicians claimed that the films were not only "trash" but also showed content unsuitable for the advancement of the working classes (Bauer and Bauer 2024). Such problematizing of mass entertainment was exacerbated by the specific history of Germany and Austria in the context of World War II. The Nazis relied on mass media as a propaganda tool, and so the war's aftermath was a period marked by a mistrust of mass culture as a means of political control, in contrast to high culture (Horak 2004).

Today, many of the debates around digital divides rely on similar dichotomies: on the one hand, problematic and passive media consumption associated with low-income and lower formal education status, and,

on the other hand, active and informed media consumption by an elite, a digitally savvy and empowered group. Many of the major regional surveys examining young people's media use distinguish between entertainment-related and information-related online activities (see, for example, Jugend, Information, Medien annual studies [JIM]). What such terms and categories have in common is an underlying and rarely critically examined judgment of what is considered desirable, productive, efficient, and ultimately a better use of digital media technologies and "deficient" digital media practices. Linked to this judgment, and underpinning the glorification of active media use for school and career purposes, lies the promise of social mobility. Could digital literacy programs indeed deliver on these promises?

Faro's story exemplifies the fallacy of isolating digital inequalities from their context and of seeking solutions grounded in information-based digital literacy. What if Faro had received training in Microsoft Word in a basic computer skills course offered by the employment agency? And what if he regularly participated in what passes for being digitally active? In none of these scenarios would his poor academic performance be erased, nor his criminal past, nor the fact that he might encounter difficulties as an immigrant and a person of color in Austria. His parents might not be able to help with the language skills or provide guidance on how he should present himself on paper or in interviews in a highly formalized and culturally specific manner. The school alone is also unlikely to change the situation. In Austria, the school system divides students into different tracks early on, depending on their performance. After four years of elementary school, students with better grades can attend a grammar school (AHS, Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule), while others attend Mittelschule (NMS, Neue Mittelschule)—a circumstance that makes it difficult to catch up with higher-achieving peers later on. The school system thus further cements existing inequalities in early socialization and reinforces the lack of role models in the immediate environment. In the 2019 OECD-led PISA study, Austria was among the countries that performed particularly poorly in the area of social mobility. In Austria, one-fifth of high achievers from higher-income families did not plan to pursue higher education, while this was the case for half of high achievers from low-income families (Nimmervoll 2019). Furthermore, in 2019, the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) estimated that a disproportionately high percentage (24 percent) of Viennese residents without Austrian citizenship completed only the compulsory school-leaving certificate required by law, while this was the case for as much as 50 percent of the Turkish population (Österreichischer Integrationsfonds 2020). Social inequalities are reinforced by measures

such as the algorithm-based recommendation system that the employment agency (AMS) introduced in 2021. The system was programmed to recommend further education only to those deemed most likely to benefit from the educational programs that the agency funds. The scores are calculated to privilege those who have the best chance of receiving a job. Faro would likely be disadvantaged by a system that makes a rational calculation that includes his criminal history and deems his case unlikely to succeed. A 2020 study of the algorithmic recommendation system found that the algorithm inadequately addresses potential issues of bias and discrimination against vulnerable groups, further cementing their disenfranchisement (Institut für Technikfolgen-Abschätzung 2021).[2]

Stories like Faro's are a grim reminder of why tech-centric terms like "digital divide" conflate the interplay of various exclusionary mechanisms underneath the surface. At the same time, the focus on active and creative digital habits may place responsibility on individuals to break out of the endless, frustrating loop of unwanted applications and to teach themselves skills they did not know they needed. Faro's story was far from being the only one. Lenny, a fourteen-year-old youth center visitor, did not have a working computer at home either. Occasionally, he would come in hungry and would be discreetly given food and drinks by youth center staff and other visitors. He would then carefully fold the large headset hanging on a precariously exposed cable. An avid gamer, he would usually proceed to spend several hours on the excruciatingly slow youth center computer. Lenny loved games and comics, and he spent most of his time watching Let's Play videos (YouTube videos of others playing video games), because the youth center computers would collapse if he tried to play a game himself. When I asked him why he spent hours watching YouTube videos while sitting alone on the uncomfortable high chair in the noisy youth center, he explained that he did not have a computer at home: "They always break somehow. My mom only gets old, used ones, and they always break as soon as I try to download a game." His phone told a similar story with its broken screen and short-lived battery. Lenny was also very creative and enjoyed writing stories and drawing popular video game characters as well as making up his own. Sometimes he would browse through his notebook, showing me simple pencil drawings scattered across the pages, some of which were inspired by a website that had step-by-step instructions for drawing popular game and comic book characters. He would have preferred to develop them digitally, but he said, "You need an iPad for that, and I don't have that." Lenny was at a similar point in life as Faro, having just graduated from middle school. During fieldwork, Lenny's future

remained uncertain, and he mostly avoided the topic altogether. When I did ask him about his plans, he vaguely replied that he would like to do "something with computers and games." However, between his dreams and reality stood more than the lack of a computer, an iPad, or relevant skills—it was also a matter of imagination regarding how this future could ever happen. No one he knew did anything "with computers and games" or could guide him in this direction, even if it were an option at this point. After graduating from middle school, Lenny began an internship at a local supermarket, a job that did not excite him. He also tried to intern at a hotel, thinking that working in different roles within the hotel would be comparable to playing role-playing games. For me, this comparison was difficult to comprehend at first, but it started to make sense after it became clear how many youth center visitors seemed lost between their personal preferences and the few jobs actually available or known to them. In this uncertainty, games were a familiar, desirable, and comfortable point of reference. But the reality often did not match the expectations. Lenny's ideal career is not just a Google search away; it began to unravel years earlier in the school system; and may eventually become entangled in the bureaucratic rituals of writing job applications—engaging in mechanical, dispassionate action, like Faro.

Traditional approaches to digital literacy do not always capture the changing nature of digital innovation or even the personal irrelevance of specific skills. In the long term, the declining popularity of computers (PCs were considered relics of the past in the 2016 Chamber of Labor study) could make related skills obsolete altogether. A future workforce might focus more on mobile devices, for example, or incorporate low-threshold software into production processes by using prebuilt codes, artificial intelligence, and mechanisms inspired by video games. This shifting prioritization of specific digital skills was evident in my interaction with Tom, an eleven-year-old youth center visitor. One day, as I was passing by the computer station, he wanted to show me something on YouTube,[3] but he could not find the application on the desktop.

"Where is YouTube?" he wondered out loud.

Confused, I asked him if he wanted to open an internet browser to find YouTube.

Now also confused, he did not understand my question. Finally, I opened the browser for him. But even then, he did not seem to know what to do with the browser. After I explained where to type YouTube.com, he went straight to the search box and typed in his name. To my surprise, we landed on his account, which showed more than ninety uploaded videos of him talking to the camera, along with about ten

followers. Although Tom was unfamiliar with a browser, the basic lever for navigating the internet on computers, he confidently handled the applications on his smartphone and his overall online presence, even posting his own videos. His skills were not deficient, only different. Perhaps Tom and his peers may want to become car mechanics—a frequently mentioned dream job among youth center visitors. It is possible that navigating Microsoft Word is not of particular relevance—neither for him individually nor for his profession, not to speak of changes that may affect office work as AI-powered tools become more efficient in the future.

Particularly in the governmental and developmental spheres, literacy and education in general are often regarded as a "liberating force" and as a path to social mobility. Such an approach sidelines structural inequalities and neocolonial and neoliberal legacies (Froerer and Portisch 2012; Froerer 2012: 334). These assumptions are often reproduced in developmental policies focused on digital literacies and technocratic solutions to the broader issues of social and economic exclusion (Barendregt 2020). There is no doubt that digital inequalities are a pressing issue. At the same time, it remains essential to question the premises under which well-intended dichotomies frame marginalized youths as only a YouTube tutorial away from digital literacy and social mobility. Such dichotomies further marginalize them and attribute a lack of self-control and passivity to them. After all, "any discussion of learning and literacy is unavoidably normative," and a question of values contested among youths, parents, and educators (Ito et al. 2010: 26). Reducing engagement with the digital to a simplistic understanding of "digital skills" risks superficial, top-down interventions (for example, digital literacy courses that focus on popular issues like fake news and cyberbullying) that distract from the underlying power dynamics and shift responsibility to the individual. The rest of the chapter further dissects these dynamics along the lines of unemployment, migration, school constraints, fragmented life histories, and social mobility in general. In this wider context, it becomes clear that everyday practices that are sometimes seen as passive and deficient can be framed as meaningful without glossing over the inequalities they also embody.

"Floating": Unemployment and Waiting

The mundane digital practices at the heart of this book often unfolded in an environment marked by high unemployment and an uncertain future. By definition, the employment lab included young people aged fourteen to nineteen who required some kind of support to find a job

or apprenticeship. The majority of youth center visitors were between fourteen and twenty-one years old. They were mostly boys or young men, and were in school, in training, or employed on construction sites or in supermarkets, electronics stores, warehouses, restaurants, or city gardens. Many had attended middle school (which, in Austria's hierarchical school system, is associated with lower formal education). Although most of the visitors born in Austria spoke fluent German, some struggled with grammar rules and the written language, even after completing compulsory schooling (at least nine years of schooling, regardless of whether they graduated with a diploma). The failure to receive a diploma (often due to repeating school years or not being graded due to poor attendance) made entry into the labor market particularly challenging. Sometimes, attending school longer than necessary was not seen as desirable, especially for those who also faced pressure to start working to support themselves or relieve their family of the burden of their educational and living costs (see also Mayer 2011). But sometimes, the disillusionment with the school system in general and struggles with mental health affected their motivation even before trying to enter the labor market.

Hence, many of my interlocutors competed in a saturated market of low-skilled workers, a situation symptomatic of the shift from industrial labor to flexible work (Oehme, Beran, and Krisch 2007: 45). While there is a shortage of a skilled labor force in Austria overall, this is not the case in the city of Vienna, where the opposite is true. The 2019 employment agency (AMS) report indicates that among the unemployed in Vienna, the percentage of those with only compulsory education was at 44 percent, while 31 percent of the unemployed have completed an apprenticeship, in contrast to higher education graduates, who make up 7 percent of those unemployed (Arbeitsmarktservice 2021). This asymmetry is amplified for people with a migration background. In 2019, the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) estimated that 9 percent of Austrian citizens in Vienna were unemployed, but for those without Austrian citizenship, the figure was as high as 17 percent (Österreichischer Integrationsfonds 2020). In addition to high unemployment in general, there is a shortage of company-sponsored apprenticeships in the city.

Consequently, the local government has invested heavily in general training and apprenticeship programs. This has led to the emergence of a highly complex ecosystem of support, coaching, and training organized by a nationwide network (NEBA: Netzwerk berufliche Assistenz) funded by the Austrian government and the European Union. The employment lab, with which I collaborated in the We:Design interdisciplinary project, was part of this broader agenda aimed at keeping young people within some kind of institutional reach during their transition

to adult life. This is done with both the stick and the carrot. Some of the programs offer a wide range of opportunities for receiving basic vocational training, with young people receiving a token payment for each day they spend in such a program. Parents whose children do not participate in one of these programs are fined, given the legal requirement in Austria (*Ausbildungspflicht*) for all children under the age of eighteen to be either in school, an apprenticeship, or work. The journey through this labyrinth usually starts with state-funded counselors who direct young people to one of these measures if necessary. There can be several next stops in various state-funded programs that provide personal coaching, orientation, and training in some basic employment-related skills. The goal is to eventually place them in a school, a socially oriented business (for instance for people with disabilities), or an apprenticeship, including those funded by the government outside the regular labor market (*Überbetriebliche Lehre*, known as ÜBA). The reasons why young people partake in the programs are diverse and range from personal difficulties, mental health issues, family problems, and addictive disorders to financial issues, unstable housing, or even a general lack of concentration, motivation, or orientation. After an initial trial period, young people usually take part in one of the programs, which teach basic employability skills (such as punctuality and regular attendance) and specific skills that match their abilities and preferences (for example, gardening, general technical training, media-oriented work). The employment lab I worked with was part of this "orientation phase" and was organized by an NGO (non-governmental organization) that offers such programs alongside many other social activities in the city of Vienna. These more specialized activities are accompanied by coaching—usually compulsory one-to-one sessions to help young people write applications and keep track of them.

This strict focus on efficiency, designed to "discipline" young people into being "fit for apprenticeship/education" (*AusbildungsFit*) has its drawbacks. As one of the employees noted, this type of structure can overwhelm those who need the most support:

> The structures, the framework structures, are often restrictive, because in very few cases do young people follow a linear path and finish compulsory schooling and apprenticeships and then continue into working life, working until they retire. Instead, there is a trial and error or failure, a termination, a new trial and error. Accompanying them in this process often goes beyond the limits of the system, because there is a participation requirement, there is a maximum participation period, and some young people need a little more leeway.

During their time on these programs, young people are encouraged to apply to companies for an apprenticeship (or to universities if they have a high school diploma). But placement opportunities in the actual labor market are scarce (which is often the reason why they go through these programs), and so most participants attend ÜBA—the next step in this subsidized system. The ÜBA apprenticeships are usually detached from a specific company or from actual economic demand, and the pay is only a fraction of the salary that their counterparts in company-based apprenticeships receive. Because of this detachment, there is no guarantee of employment afterward, which can lead to the problem of unemployment only being postponed. The young people taking part often remain in the same situation and continue to compete for the few jobs available. Moreover, their CVs bear a permanent stamp of failure in the search for a subsidized training place signaling their early dependence on social programs. In an article from 2020, the editors of the Viennese newspaper *Falter* described ÜBA as a "second-hand apprenticeship and collection point for young people with baggage" (Goldenberg and Wittstock 2020, my translation). For an employment lab staff member, it is less about improving support structures and more about political efforts to involve the private sector: "It would be great if more companies would take responsibility . . . that it doesn't always have to be ÜBA, but that companies also take people on extended apprenticeships or partial qualifications. That is certainly lobbying work that is necessary, where politicians should make companies take responsibility."

Besides the fact that there is more demand for jobs than supply in Vienna, discrimination is another issue that plays a vital role in some young people's transitional periods. In addition to ÜBA, smaller government-sponsored initiatives are also trying to combat youth unemployment by offering matchmaking services between young people and recruiting companies outside Vienna. One of these was the 2018 initiative described in the liberal Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*. It involved several buses transporting young men to factories outside the city for a one-day internship. Of the eighty-six young men, only two were ultimately hired. Company representatives primarily blamed the poor language skills of the mostly immigrant young men for not hiring them. The authors of the article in *Der Standard* concluded that widespread prejudices among potential employers make the success of such initiatives unlikely (Szigetvari 2019). One youth center staff member summarized his experience with youths, who often told him of similar incidents: "They [potential employers] see someone named Mohammed, and that's it." Another staff member told me about a young man from Chechnya whose only "fault" was the "bad reputation" associated with

Chechen youths: "He couldn't find an apprenticeship for several years, even though he's very nice and tried really hard. And he really tried very hard. Now he has found a job in the postal warehouse, and he is happy about it. I told him to take the job and try to move up in the company later on." Yet, "foreignness" also became a site of comfort, familiarity, and a way to negotiate one's place in society after facing repeated rejections. Amin, for example, was a sixteen-year-old hairdresser trainee. He was one of many who desired to work as a car mechanic but could not find an apprenticeship. After being pressured by his mother, he found a hairdresser who was willing to train him, "But as soon as I pass the final exam, I will leave. That's how foreigners are, they always leave." He then spoke about his ambitions to open his own hairdressing business one day, because he does not like being ordered to clean things. Amin had just started dating a girl, and he was already earnest about the relationship. Still, he was glad he had not met her parents yet, because he wanted to "become a man" before he could ask her to marry him: "I want to graduate, then a job, then an apartment, then some money for the wedding. Maybe get my military service over with, or maybe community service, but probably military because there is more money in it. And it is all about money. Only then am I a man." Becoming a man entailed a straightforward path of things coming together in a state of security and stability. Amin's "career" goals were not so much a desire to specialize in hairdressing, but to "become a man" and gain independence—to find a way to restore his dignity as a foreigner who does not like being told what to do by "Austrians," thus breaking free from the dependency relationships with external time regimes and power dynamics that defined him as a foreigner.

Amin's story—of not being able to do this dream job as a car mechanic and then subsequently settling for the jobs more readily available—was a common tale. Onur was a young man with curly hair and a leather jacket that he never took off at the youth center. He was constantly ready to jump up and go outside for a collective cigarette smoke. He began an apprenticeship as a tiler. Previously, he had tried to become a car mechanic but found nothing because foreigners were "known to steal things," as he put it. Mirko, meanwhile, was a young man from Serbia who was a car fanatic and who, when he learned I would bike to the youth center, advised me, "Bike is shit, get a car." He found a job as a truck mechanic, saying, "But only because my uncle owns trucks and was an important customer there and made them hire me. It's a very good company; there are no foreigners. Austrians are great, but sometimes I wish there were more foreigners." Simply by being a "foreigner" and despite being born in Vienna, Mirko felt somewhat out of place in a con-

tested career space, well aware that he was defying the odds and wishing for the familiarity of other foreigners. In the context of limited access to the labor market, the role of family members in finding work was even more relevant, especially when state institutions could not help. In this context, the personal pursuit of career advancement becomes a collective effort of juggling one's position in society with limited opportunities rather than an isolated act of strategic (digital) wizardry.

Without implicit knowledge of the inner workings of state institutions, these institutions can sometimes disorient rather than orient. On one of the afternoons in the youth center, Cem, a seventeen-year-old young man who rarely spent time there, told me and the staff seated around the small table dotted with playing cards about his employment struggles. Cem grew up first in Austria and then in Turkey. After returning to Austria on his own, he went to the employment office. He was then turned away by the caseworker and told to "study something." The caseworker, however, failed to inform him of the requirements necessary for him to begin studying at university—such as the need for an equivalent Austrian high school diploma or the translation and recognition of his degree in Austria. Shortly after our conversation, it became clear that he was not familiar with the requirements of a university because he did not know if he could attend or what he could do there. The "state" told him to study, and he heard that the university was good. Without a job, apprenticeship, or vocational training, Cem welcomed such guidance, even if it did little to help him turn such advice into reality. "You know, not working is not good," he said. "Working is good. But a Turkish lady called me recently and said she could help me find a job at a temp agency." He dreamed of traveling to Paris and London, but only if he found a job soon, which seemed unlikely at the moment (along with his dreams of marrying a virgin someday, which he also thought unlikely because of the general rarity of virgins). Finally, the youth center staff, angry at the employment office's negligence, took matters into their own hands by informing him of the procedures and realistic possibilities. Frequently, trust directed at the employment office was tarnished among the staff. They complained about "bad consultants" who wrote terrible application templates that had to be double-checked.

The staff often played an intermediary role between the bureaucratic apparatus of state institutions and youths, translating policies and filling in the gaps. However, their support also had an affective dimension. They empathetically listened to the frustrating stories of those looking for a job or going through an endless series of unsuccessful interviews, and they offered emotional support. Samuel, for example, was twenty-one years old. He was a regular youth center visitor, and a skilled drafts-

man who had been unemployed on and off for years. At the time, Samuel was living alone on welfare and did not have a good relationship with his parents. One day, Samuel told the staff about an upcoming job interview and mentioned that he could not afford a haircut. Two young female employees rummaged in the crafts corner, found an old pair of household scissors, and offered to cut his hair. What could have gone aesthetically (and frankly medically) wrong in the hands of the inexperienced improvisational hairdressers turned into a touching act of kinship-like care as they cut, shampooed, and washed his hair in the girls' restroom. Similarly, trainers and coaches in the lab were highly engaged in the lives of their protégées through continual acts of care—following them along on every little step, sitting with them through bouts of dissipating motivation, providing emotional cushioning after rejection, reminding them of appointments, and becoming invested in the ups and downs.

Looking at the bigger picture, these examples reveal the limitations of simple solutions in overcoming complex socioeducational barriers. Certainly, Amin could have updated his professional LinkedIn page, but it probably would not have helped him find a job as a car mechanic. Cem could have done a Google search for local universities and official requirements, but that would not necessarily have led him to understand the complex hierarchical system of Austrian formal education, where family background and early school choice influence the chances of accessing higher education and broader employment opportunities. Finally, Samuel could have effortlessly photoshopped and tweaked his profile picture using one of the smartphone app filters, but it would not have given him access to an actual haircut before his interview. Without the support network of family and friends and social institutions, many young people struggle to navigate an environment of high unemployment and discrimination, and they become a "person" despite the disorienting burden of early disappointments and failures. One of the staff described this in-between state as "floating." Speaking with Erwin, an unemployed young man who had just dropped out of an apprenticeship he found uninteresting, the staff member noted that Erwin "was floating in the air." Floating seems an apt metaphor to describe a disoriented state of the in-between, where little makes sense and one's future is on hold, reminiscent of the notion of the structurally imposed waiting of entire "floating populations" (Bayart 2007) amid neoliberal reforms in the Global South. Awareness of limited opportunities is often met with a lack of interest in those limited career options. This leads to stagnation and the question of why do anything at all, especially when that exclusion has been cemented along essentialist ethnic lines. Kiran,

for example, came to the center for the first and only time during fieldwork. Within minutes, he was engaged in a passionate conversation with staff about politics and his identity as a foreigner, even though he was born in Austria and held an Austrian passport. "I'm tired of being made aware that I'm a second-class citizen," he proclaimed. Recently, his teacher told him in front of the whole class that he should consider himself lucky to be in this country. Kiran asked why, and the teacher replied, "Because you're a Syrian refugee, right?" Kiran was furious as he told this story. "I want to go to Turkey and get my high school diploma. I have had enough." Technology alone would not necessarily change or even impact the states of disorientation, floating, and limbo experienced by these youths. In schools, some of these themes of disorientation resurface, albeit in a different shape.

"I Just Want to Finish School"

The young people who came to the employment lab had very different biographies, school careers, and skills—digital and otherwise. What many of them had in common, however, was some version of a frustrating experience with school. Some spoke of pressure, stress, overwhelm, lack of motivation to learn, ADHD, or simply an inability to keep up with their peers, especially after changing the type of school they attended. Some were suspended for behavioral issues; others had problems with certain subjects or "mean" teachers. And some were disappointed with the school system in general because they lacked a connection to real life. One eighteen-year-old employment lab participant shared her thoughts on this:

> You learn things there that are just useless knowledge. Yeah, maybe it's cool to know that, but it's not essential. So, why don't you sit down with us and we'll discuss how to sign a tenancy agreement? What do you need to consider if you want a flat? Where shouldn't you go? If it's maybe some kind of scam or something. Well, that's discussed here [in the lab]. We've already had small workshops or something like that, where we're supposed to look for flats, and they discuss it with us. Is that possible with the costs? What kind of apprenticeship could you do? If that were possible, would it be realistic, blah, blah, blah. So it's actually more about you as a person. And not like at school, where you're like a machine that's just supposed to work. Just like that.

Her analysis gets to the heart of the problem with the Austrian school system, which, like many other school systems around the world, has

not necessarily changed much over the last century—it's a highly stratified system that arguably harms disadvantaged young people the most. Not learning how to deal with the world is a privilege for those who have sufficient resources elsewhere, such as parental support in dealing with housing, finances, taxes, or work. Instead, social welfare programs such as employment labs step in at a time when it is often already too late—if at all. The labs are independently organized and do not share a common curriculum. As such, they also rely on the trainers' individual motivation.

Those interlocutors who were still in the school system were exposed to the pressures that had previously alienated the participants in the employment lab. I frequently visited a number of Austrian schools as part of several projects, and I conducted longer ethnographic fieldwork in one Viennese school. It was a private middle and high school with a vocational focus in the commercial sector—here, pupils can, in theory, graduate with their Matura, the high school diploma that qualifies them for certain professions and for further education and studies. Most of the pupils also had previous experience with migration, either in their own biography or in their parents' ones. The setting, however, was rather different from the youth centers or employment labs. The school was a place of aspiration for social mobility and white-collar work, yet also a site where the fear of failure thrived, as will be elaborated later. As a private school, it charged monthly tuition and offered vocational training focused on the service industry or accounting, and it also promised to integrate "entrepreneurship" into the curriculum. The school conveyed stability as well as a promise of success and social mobility through its corporate language on the website and on its promotional materials. For example, the stream that included after-school tuition promised high standards and educational success by guaranteeing, among other things, "higher numbers of students with German as their native language" and "German as a designated language in the school breaks," according to posters on the classroom wall. The issue of the German language being spoken in schools is often recycled in political discourses usually initiated by right-wing parties, who use the argument that certain schools have no students speaking German, for their political agendas. As Danila Mayer writes, children with migration backgrounds are often held responsible for the declining quality of Viennese schools, although they are the ones most affected by it. As a result of the bad reputation of schools with a high percentage of multilingual children, middle-class parents, regardless of whether they have a migration background, increasingly turn to private (sometimes confessional) schools (2011: 72). The class I visited was indeed

heterogeneous and the German language frequently mixed with BCS (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian) or Turkish, with BCS even offered on the curriculum. Once, when the students were making fun of each other's cultural background, as they often did, I asked how many "Austrians" were in the class. Most had Austrian passports, but only a few identified themselves as such: "Actually . . . there is only one Austrian in our class," they said, pointing to Marie. The school did not attract the cosmopolitan children of diplomats but rather students who were preparing for office jobs in accounting and who often came from working-class families. Most were second-generation children of immigrants from Serbia, Bosnia, and Turkey. Many "chose" this particular school because their parents wanted their children to find stable jobs. Hence, the prominent promise of "more children speaking German" was used to signal quality assurance and ultimately the potential for social mobility.

The setting of the classes, to which I was kindly granted access by a classroom teacher between October 2018 and June 2019, permitted me to engage in casual conversations with students, which I initiated when they conversed or appeared bored. The classes I attended consisted of unstructured weekly time slots in which the twenty-three students aged fifteen to seventeen could complete their homework at their own pace, collaborating with their peers. According to the teacher, the students were motivated to act independently and organize their own learning. They were therefore free to structure their time as they wished. In addition to the teacher, a trainer was also present to provide support as needed. During these hours, I took turns sitting with smaller groups as they chatted, did homework, scrolled through social media feeds, or played online games. As long as they did not disturb the others, they were allowed to spend their time as they pleased, and smartphones were not prohibited.

Mostly, smartphones were social time fillers for those who were bored with homework and those who had already done the homework or who just wanted to share a funny YouTube video with their classmates, send a WhatsApp message, or play a game on Snapchat. The only school-specific role for smartphones was to serve as a camera to photograph someone else's homework, which was easier than borrowing a notebook and could be shared with more people. Some students were notorious for walking around and photographing others' homework. Those who shared their homework, however, also gained visibility and social status by posting responses to the class-related WhatsApp group. The WhatsApp group was primarily used to share homework and gossip about teachers, in contrast to a parallel WhatsApp group that included the classroom teacher and maintained a more moderate, self-censored tone. In addition to smartphones, Texas Instruments calculators also made frequent appearances.

Interestingly, smartphone use seems to have shaped the way calculators were now held, although they retained their usual shape and size. When I was in school, my classmates and I used this identical calculator by typing commands while the calculator was sitting on the table. This is probably how the calculator was designed, as seen, for example, in an old commercial from 1977 (Texas Instruments 1977). The students I observed in class, however, held their calculators with both hands while typing with their thumbs—similar to how they held their smartphones. Otherwise, computers (which were available in one of the two rooms for these classes) were only used when the homework assignment involved an explicit computer-based task, such as creating a PowerPoint presentation. Neither smartphones nor PCs played a significant role in retrieving information online, unless it was an explicit assignment set by the teacher—students generally relied on classmates, books, and other materials provided, rather than on digital resources in class.

Classes usually began with an introduction from the class teacher. Sometimes this involved a conversation about the poor overall performance of the class: "Literally all of you have a warning," the teacher once announced as she scolded the students for their poor grades. Such warnings were given before final grades, to warn students who were in danger of failing the class. Overall, during the school year when my visits took place, most students struggled with their grades, while none excelled in all or even most subjects. Losing the year or possibly even failing the Matura (the prerequisite for pursuing higher education) seemed to be a constant fear. They frequently inquired about how many times they could fail without being suspended and calculated how old they would be when they reached the Matura if they failed once or twice. Evan was one of the few students with good grades in subjects related to accounting. When I asked him whether he liked those subjects, he replied, "Well, not really, but they're OK."

"Why do you go to this school of all schools?" I asked.

He stared at me, then said, "It's the only school that would accept me. Several schools turned me down."

"So do you want to work in this field?" I asked.

Evan replied, "I have no idea. Honestly, I just want to finish school."

Many of Evan's classmates ended up in school more or less by accident and rarely had concrete plans for the future. Jana, the sixteen-year-old student who immigrated from Bosnia and Herzegovina several years ago, also struggled in several subjects. When I asked her why she stood out negatively in one of the subjects, she said bluntly, "Because I don't care. I am at this school because my parents wanted me to be and because my sister was already here. I didn't really want to be here, and I

really wanted to stop going to school and do an apprenticeship, but my parents wouldn't allow it—they say it's a good school. But I really don't want to be an accountant and sit in an office all day."

"What kind of training would you have done instead?" I asked.

She quickly replied, "Medicine. Something to do with medicine. Maybe I can still do that and maybe go to university when I graduate from high school. But who knows . . ."

Gregor, a quiet boy whose parents had emigrated from Serbia as a child, also found himself at the school more or less by accident. He said, "I wanted to go to another school after middle school because my friend went there, but I didn't get in. So I tried here. But now I'm happy because the teachers aren't so strict, and it's easier than in the other, more technical school."

"What profession would you like to work in?" I inquired.

He hesitated. "Probably something with cars."

According to its website and the promotional posters on the walls, the school was a place that prepared its students for a future career in business, promising success and a German-speaking environment. But the concerns the students shared were more immediate—keeping their heads above water and eventually graduating from school with the big prize that seemed far away: the Matura, the high school degree. Nabi was particularly aware of the fleeting promise of the Matura. She entered school after being educated in a middle school usually attended by those who do not aspire to higher education. After transferring to the private school that leads to the Matura, she struggled to keep up and had to repeat a year.

Nabi said, "I actually went to parents' day with my mother, and there was this economics teacher who tried to get me to leave school. She said to me, 'The train is leaving and you didn't manage to get on the train,' and we were going to argue with her, but then we decided to ignore her."

"What do you want to do for work in future?" I asked.

Nabi laughed. "Become a truck driver?" Then her face turned serious. "I'll probably work in a bank, but only if I finish school."

Nabi sounded unconvinced that she could jump on this high-speed train. She and her peers were juggling their own desires and fears, the expectations of their parents and teachers, and the fleeting promise of high school graduation as a ticket to a world with more opportunities. Given that most of their parents had an immigrant background, school may have appeared to be a lever for social mobility and future job security—and thus a collective investment in the future generation's success. In this context, smartphones became a welcome distraction in an educational space that failed to interest; or, at best, a tool for effi-

ciently copying homework. The school, with its several computer rooms and fast computers, was a place of explicit digital literacy: Students were expected to learn basic skills in PowerPoint, Excel, and touch-typing as part of a curriculum that prepared them for office work. At first glance, the private school seemed to be where digital media technologies were more likely being used for learning and in career-enhancing, strategic ways. But instead of talking about their careers, many students in the class I attended (two years away from graduation) were primarily concerned with simply "finishing school," while digital technologies rarely played any strategic roles in the endeavor.

"Making It": Fragmented Life Stories

One of the more spectacular narratives linked to digital media technologies and youth concerns is the story of self-optimization through perfect filters, profiles, and tools for making an idealized and optimized "self" (Wolff 2018). To what extent, however, does this framing make sense, considering the acute concerns of many of my interlocutors? Young people I encountered shared worries around achieving stability in terms of finishing school and finding employment. They spoke about their concerns regarding school and unemployment, and they shared modest hopes for the future. There was no mention of using placative digital self-optimization tools like fitness apps, and optimizing one's image online was considered a trivial pastime at best. Coming of age and imagining a future is not easy in the context of high unemployment, distrust of the state and its institutions, or a hierarchical school system that throws the weaker students "off the train." Neither is becoming a person easy in a life fragmented by immigration, family problems, petty crime, or school failure. Such fragmented biographies, early obstacles, and "everyday ruptures" (Coe et al. 2011) mean that pieces must be picked up to keep one's head above water, not necessarily to advance one's life course, with or without digital technologies. Instead, the smartphone here becomes a reflection of the everyday ruptures in which it is embedded. Rather than complying with abstract pressures to self-optimize in a neoliberal fashion or worrying about digital optimization, my interlocutors often had to "make it" first.

For Marko, the eighteen-year-old student at the private school, his main concern was one of "standing on [his] own two feet." Asked about his future plans, he replied, "My goal is to pass the Matura. I don't know, I want to try. Let's put it this way: I'm still young, so I have to make my way first. I want to try to become independent, like my father, who owns a company." He then went on to explain that his father works at a con-

struction site and has several employees, so he plans to join him. His top priority, however, is stability. "I want to finish school, get my Matura, and then find a real job. I have to stand on my own two feet first, to stand firmly on the ground."

"If someone were to make a movie about your life, what would the movie be about?" I asked.

He replied, "It wouldn't be very rosy. I was involved in much trouble, you know. I mean, I still am, but I have to pull myself together now. It's always up and down. I'm trying to fight through it, to get it together."

As for Amin, the aspiring hairdresser, his trajectory seemed less about the job itself and more about stabilizing himself in ways known and available to him.

At some point, efforts to "make it" can appear to lead into a void. Dani, for example, once visited the youth center before applying as a plumber's apprentice—a training position that the employment agency organized for him. He was supposed to bring his résumé and school reports for the staff to check before he would apply. His report cards indicated a poor school performance. He barely passed half the subjects, and the other half remained ungraded because he did not attend classes and did not manage to graduate from middle school. Now that he had reached the age where he was no longer legally required to attend school, he had no plans to finish. While staff seemed excited about his newfound motivation, their prognosis later in the debriefing was grim: "He has no chance at all. He's probably looking at ten years of welfare," one staff member predicted. Dani lived with his father and stepmother, both of whom allegedly neglected him. The staff said, "They leave him and his sister to fend for themselves. They don't care if they go to school or not. They don't wake them up if they miss school." Even if Dani were to pick up the pieces of his life, the chances of him putting them back together remain slim. Instead, he could end up in a yearlong suspension of the future, where the vision of the future gets fuzzier with each additional year in the welfare system.

For some, this rupture in their CVs may relate to petty crime—a circumstance that establishes a relationship of mistrust with state-associated institutions from an early age. As Anna, a staff member, noted about the Chechen community, "All their lives, they are told about all the bad Chechens. Of course, if you hear that all the time, one day you become this image that they project onto you." What sometimes began as a silly act, committed out of a sense of youthful adventurism with peers, can have severe consequences for those already carrying the label of potential trouble—foreigners and asylum seekers. The implications of these adventures, however, are not always clear to the youths. In one case, a

group of Chechen boys was caught carrying out credit card theft. After finding credit card data on the dark web (a network where online identities can be disguised), they checked into a hotel with these card details in order to have a party. Since one of them used his real ID to check into the hotel, they were caught several weeks later. This was not the first time they had done this. Previously, they used the credit card details to buy supermarket vouchers, which they used to buy chips and sweets. Despite limited financial resources, this was not so much a necessity as a way to participate, an adventure with the promise of adrenaline and excitement. But these adventures took place without the asylum seekers among them realizing that crossing such boundaries might have worse consequences. It was only when they made a mistake and the police got wind of it that the full range of consequences became crystal clear to them: Many were looking for apprenticeships or had just started a new job—all of which could now be at risk if they had to serve a sentence, with their status as asylum seekers also jeopardized. Once these experiences had crept into a résumé, it was too late to undo them. This is where the dark web becomes a subversive space for those who are constantly becoming aware of their own "badness"—spaces where they are in control and where they become digital entrepreneurs of a different kind, turning stereotypes into a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is also an alternative digital space that is confidently navigated but one that rarely appears in surveys that glorify active and competent use of digital technologies. This issue, however, is less a question of digital competence and more a question of social exclusion and the associated playing with (digital) fire.

Fragmentation can also be traced to family histories shaped by social inequality and migration. Some of the youth were children of first-generation immigrants from Turkey, many of whom arrived during the 1960s and 1970s as unskilled laborers. They endured years of physically demanding work before taking early retirement. For some, language barriers persisted from home into school life, affecting educational trajectories. Monika Palmberger's (2019) research with Turkish immigrants in Vienna highlights that some of the ambivalence her interlocutors felt about living in Austria stemmed from disappointment when their children failed to access quality education or achieve upward mobility—falling short of the very hopes for a better, more prosperous future, which had originally drawn their families to Austria.

"You Will Be a Gardener": Social Mobility

One of the conclusions that recent studies on the digital divide arrive at concerns the advantages of the use of digital media in strategic, career-

enhancing ways. This is more frequent among individuals with higher educational backgrounds. But what do career-enhancing strategies look like in an environment of restricted social mobility? How do digital skills come into play?

The notion of social mobility assumes a desire to improve social and economic status (Froerer and Portisch 2012: 345). However, social exclusion and a lack of choice also lead to rebellion. David, a sixteen-year-old apprentice gardener, was suspended from his state-funded apprenticeship after arguing with his instructor and telling her he did not want to continue working as "a slave" for three hundred euros a month. His career as a gardener ended abruptly before it had really begun. His employer, Jobfabrik (which translates as "Job Factory"), was part of a wider state-funded employment scheme for young people, the aforementioned AusbildungsFit. Jobfabrik trains new apprentices in its own workshops, aiming to refer them to company-sponsored apprentices after a year of trial training. At some point, he would have either been selected for an apprenticeship or had to leave—a crossroads he was never to reach because of his early suspension. The day before the training began, David was at the youth center as usual. He was excited and anxious to find his way and get on the right buses and subways. When asked, he admitted that he had never left the neighborhood alone, only with groups of friends and family members—as was common in his peer group, which rarely opted for structured leisure activities such as football training. Surprised, I asked him if he had the Google Maps app on his phone to help him find his way. He shrugged and said, "I think I do . . . But I don't know what to do with it."

David was sure of his decision to become a gardener, especially since it was not really a choice: "I can only be a gardener or carpenter. I would rather be a carpenter, but you need math for that." He had only recently received his school report cards, and he had barely passed most subjects, including math. He continued. "And my teacher said to me, 'I can see it in your eyes—you're going to be a gardener.' Besides, my brother is also a gardener. Actually, I wanted to be an electrical engineer. I can do many things—I can even fix my own smartphone. But for that, I need math and a HTL [a high school with a technical focus], so I can't do that." Now he had to start from scratch after his attempt to enter a predestined profession failed—not predestined in the sense of a vocational "calling," but because an authority figure naturalized the lack of choice with the remark, "I can see it in your eyes." Eventually, however, David rebelled against the fate society had marked out for him, after he found himself in a job he did not like and that offered limited financial incentives. His rebellion reinforced the state of limbo in which both an

imagined future and social (and literal) mobility are suspended. This is not to say, however, that this temporary stagnation is a sign of passivity. As Paul Willis (1977) articulates in his classic work *Learning to Labour*, based on ethnographic research among working-class "lads" in 1970s Britain, working-class youths can exercise (gendered) forms of agency by rebelling against authority and choosing to fail. Yet, as Mayer, who encountered many such stories of interrupted training, argues in her ethnography of Viennese park youths, those failures might also be retold as "success stories" to ease the burden later on (2011: 174). Such success stories were also observed by Jenna Burrell, who, in her ethnography conducted in Ghana's internet cafés, met predominantly young men engaged in transnational scamming and fraud. These "tales" of successful fraud did not necessarily arise from ignorance of moral pitfalls but from a sense of agency in a setting where legal avenues failed to provide employment or financial success or access to global economy. In a way, they were particularly successful at repurposing digital spaces "not designed with them in mind" (Burrell 2012: 200) and hijacking access to overseas wealth.

And once again, we find digital literacy in a way that is invisible because it does not come with a certificate—after all, fixing a smartphone is a highly complex and specialized skill, but one that is of little value in a world that expects excellent and certified math grades. Yet, this is certainly not an ode to certificates as a magic wand of social mobility. As Willis notes, "No conceivable number of certificates among the working class will make for a classless society, or convince industrialists and employers—even if they were able—that they should create more jobs" (1977: 167). It would be "unwise for working class kids to place their trust in diplomas and certificates" (169). Decades after Willis's report on working-class British boys, we find a similar story in Stefan Wellgraf's (2018) ethnography on the "problem school" in Berlin. Most of the young people he met lived in families dependent on social welfare, a future that, in their minds, awaited them too. As a result, many had little motivation to commit themselves to what most would see as an alienating, profoundly boring, and pointless educational exercise. Indeed, even those who managed to finish with a middle school diploma rarely found a job. The phlegmatic graduation ceremony described by Wellgraf reflected the lack of excitement that preceded this achievement, thus noting the end of the seemingly aimless journey.

David's story of limited choices inscribed in his body and his later sense of resignation was not uncommon among the young men in the youth centers. Some, however, played along with the social mobility game. Arnel was one of them. Arnel's mother and stepfather moved

from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Vienna when he was a baby. Now, at seventeen, he was full of life, loud, bubbly, and known for taking a particular interest in all new interns. As soon as he spotted a newcomer, he quickly invited them to sit next to him on the sofas and told them about himself. "Suzana," he rightly remarked, "you're lucky I'm here today, on your first day," before proceeding to tell me about his life. Arnel loved making big appearances and being the center of attention, and, among other things, he installed his own picture as the wallpaper on the official youth center's tablet. His mother worked at a market and his father at a construction site. Arnel came close to being everybody's darling at the youth center and was popular with the staff. His classmates appreciated him as an excellent gamer and table tennis player, and he also sometimes performed as a DJ at youth center events.

After he graduated from middle school, he realized that his time to apply to a secondary school was running out. He and his mother googled schools and were very impressed with the look of the first (private) school they found online. They then went to apply, even before he officially received his middle school graduation certificates. The school had a general vocational focus on jobs ranging from office administrator to service personnel. Arnel was particularly taken with the wide range of options, as he could still postpone his decision on a prospective profession. According to him, he so charmed the principal, a middle-aged woman, that she promised to give him a place at the school without having seen his grades, and she also complimented his mother by saying that she had never seen such a well-mannered young man. Although he had landed at the school through the random act of googling, he quickly realized that he would have to appear polished to succeed in an environment that felt instinctively different, yet also desirable and promising.

Arnel paid attention to details that had to do with status and wealth, a habit that became evident early in our interactions: When we first met, he fixed his gaze on my watch and tried to guess its value. Once at the new school, it was not long before Arnel began to carefully observe the new environment he found himself in. He quickly noticed a stark contrast to his previous school by pointing out that there were barely any people with a migration background: "There was a whole sea of Austrians, hardly any foreigners." As he talked about this, he reached for his smartphone to show me a picture of his class: "Look, there are twenty-five people, and they're all Schwabos, except for four. And you know what Austrians are like . . ." Because of my own Bosnian background, Arnel often invoked the common experience of being a "Jugo" in Austria (a person from one of the countries of the former Yugoslavia)

living among the "Schwabos" (a South Slavic slang term for Germans and Austrians). "You know what Austrians are like" consisted of, among other things, observing that his classmates dressed differently. He said, "I used to go to school in Adidas clothes and wear a cap. Now I wear jeans and a sweater." But this was not just an attempt to fit in, based on his observations, but also a result of the pressures he faced. On one occasion, he said, "There was this group of girls in class who got on my nerves. They said, 'Oh, so you only have one jacket?'" The girls were insinuating that he could not afford another one, because he always wore the same jacket to school. But Arnel did not see himself as a victim. As he explained, he did not take it personally, and he found them annoying and "bitchy." Nevertheless, before coming to the youth center, he changed from the sweater and jeans into his old Adidas clothes and took out the gold cross necklace he wore hidden at school—because he became increasingly aware that Adidas pants and a gold necklace were a sign that he was out of place as a "Jugo in a sea of Austrians." The tensions that did not allow him to fit in went beyond clothing. He reported arguing with the class president, who picked on him. The class representative was known to be a supporter of the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreich—FPÖ), the Austrian right-wing party, and this class representative publicly posted party content on his social media accounts. At one point, Arnel also reported that he almost punched one of his classmates after another joke about "shitty foreigners" and Jugos: "But I restrained myself, of course. I know that if I do that, I'll get suspended. And I also know that they can't go too far and cross the line because I have a good relationship with the teachers and the principal. I can always go there and complain, and then there will be trouble." In addition to the teachers, Arnel also had a good relationship with a cleaner from Bosnia at the school, and he was proud that he was the only one who sat down and talked with her, treating her with a coffee from the coffee vending machine. After a while, Arnel befriended a new classmate. With long hair and a hoodie, his new friend also seemed out of place at this school. "Can you believe this?" he joked while showing me his friend's picture. "He looks like that, and he has a girlfriend and I don't?" His friend was Austrian, but according to Arnel, he was not really considered a Schwabo, because he had "street cred" and because he was *korrekt* (German slang for "cool" or for "being all right"). The ongoing process of negotiating Arnel's new role involved a careful balancing act between his identity and his efforts to defy stereotypes and fit in.

Arnel's dilemma was compounded during his internship as a waiter. During a trial day at school, he was selected by an owner of an estab-

lished, conservative, high-priced Viennese restaurant to join his restaurant team during the summer months. The restaurant owner observed Arnel's ability to effortlessly engage in conversation with his guests during a trial tasting. "Their menu is really expensive. A schnitzel costs twenty or thirty euros. They have mostly tourists and lawyers and people like that coming in," Arnel said, describing the restaurant. At first, he was excited to get a glimpse into another sphere of society, but he was also disappointed by what he saw. He said, "I realized that this world is not really mine. Even if I become a clerk, I don't want to be like that. I overheard some conversations among the guests, and that's not what I want to be. One of them is an accountant in a big bank. He has a ring on his finger and a wife, but he comes in with a different woman every week and starts cuddling with her. I don't want that. One of them gave a lot of money to charity, he might be a neurosurgeon or something. But the tips are great."

Grinning, he went on to show me the restaurant's Facebook page, where they had promised to upload his picture—something he was particularly proud of. Arnel was one of the few young interlocutors I met who used Facebook—mainly because he wanted to maintain good relationships with adults. Yet, he paid little attention to his Facebook account and was primarily on Instagram, where he sometimes posted pictures of himself with his friends in Vienna or with his cousins in Bosnia. Instagram represented a realm of leisure where he could post pictures he liked without worrying about censoring his appearance or hiding his necklace. He juggled different worlds, carefully choosing how he would dress for a date or whether to take the girl out for *burek* (an inexpensive pastry popular in Bosnia and widely available in Vienna) or to Vapiano (a mid-range Italian restaurant chain)—depending on whether the girl was a Jugo or Austrian.

Treading carefully between fitting in and challenging expectations could reach its limits when the complexity of the institutions paving the way for a dream career remained incomprehensible. Although Arnel had taken the step of googling a "good" school, his disadvantage became apparent when he thought about his future. Vaguely, he knew he preferred to be a clerk, though not like the one he observed at the restaurant. But it was not until the end of his third year of school that Arnel, now eighteen, realized that he would have had to take a completely different path to become an office administrator—the track leading to the Matura. Apart from the fact that he would still have to finish his own track, he would have had to study for three more years (leading to the Matura) in addition to the three years of high school he would complete in his current track. Since the staff at the youth center and I

could not fathom this to be accurate, we all circled him as he showed us the school website, while we tried to decipher the school system collectively, only to realize finally that he was right: "When I started, I didn't know about the Matura, what it means and how to get there," he remarked. Now it was too late. His parents could not afford another three years of private schooling, and he had no interest in going to school for another three years and postponing his independence and the possibility of earning an income. Arnel reached the limit on the social ladder by missing out on implicit cultural knowledge, despite his best efforts and despite his family's significant financial investment. The structural disadvantages addressed earlier in this chapter mirror, to some extent, the work of social-reproduction theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1971), who argued that the formal education system does not level the playing field but rather further reinforces and legitimizes social inequalities. But as Paul Willis (1977), among others, has argued, structural disadvantages do not determine or extinguish young people's social agency. Arnel's and David's agency and choice are essential. Yet, the stumbling blocks that Arnel and his peers on the margins of society must negotiate daily are numerous.

Young people like David and Arnel are at a crossroads in their lives. Actively googling a "good" school and thus using digital technologies in their efforts to advance in their careers is a mere drop in the bucket. Such practices cannot be isolated from the subtle ways in which one's place in society is signaled—be it the way David's eyes seem to say *gardener* or the way the schoolgirls' giggles manifest Arnel's otherness. Their disorientation at the crossroads of their futures is perhaps not much different from that of their more affluent peers. It even appears in major theories of modernity (Giddens 1991; Beck 1995) that diagnose increasing individualism and fragmentation of social embeddedness in urban, industrialized regions. As the guiding norms of small-scale communities dissolve, an infinite pool of possibilities opens up, as does the pressure to find a "true" vocation (Chevron 2004). However, for David and Arnel, the sense of being lost is not symptomatic of choice but instead of a discrepancy between desire and reality, a result of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011). This sense of being lost is further cemented by the unfortunate comments of teachers who offer advice that might provide the only pointers available. It is further cemented by the gamble of a random online search. The search probably did not reveal much more about the private school Arnel had chosen, except that it had invested in a website optimized for Google searches and therefore appeared as the first result. But the shiny promise of social mobility and a "sea of Austrians" as markers of success obscures implicit knowledge about the

inner workings of such institutions—implicit knowledge that Arnel, despite his exceptional observational efforts, did not know he lacked.

Digital Entrepreneurial Selves?

The notion of productive, career-enhancing modes of media use corresponds to the image of proactive, competent digital natives in the individualistic, digitalized world. These exemplary individuals fit the mold of what the sociologist Ulrich Bröckling (2007) would call the "entrepreneurial self," drawing on work by Foucault (Foucault et al. 1993; Foucault 1995) and Nikolas S. Rose (1998). For Rose, self-optimization became a way of governing and a moral necessity in neoliberal societies (2000: 324). Rather than governing through oppression and disciplinary mechanisms, autonomous individuals are free to make rational, calculated, and self-maximizing choices. This construct of personhood is echoed in the narratives of new generations of tech-savvy youths who are actively acquiring digital expertise and confidently and efficiently navigating online spaces and digital technologies. Online recruitment platforms such as LinkedIn are designed to present oneself as a sum of soft skills that are "segmentable, testable, and rankable" (Urciuoli 2008). In *Selling Your Self in the United States* (2014), Gershon also argues that digital spaces provide an ideal "arena to perform oneself." Gershon sees Facebook as a place where the self can be presented and optimized as a brand. By externalizing the self into a well-rounded digital representation (a profile), a person can view themself from a certain distance as a project "to be controlled and enhanced." Not only do such platforms enable the construction of a neoliberal project; they also help quantify alliances and relationships by providing the counts of friends or quantifying social support through likes—a potentially useful metric for companies recruiting new employees (Gershon 2014). Platforms popular with Austrian youths at the time of research, such as TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram, are also thriving venues for influencers to convert social capital (number of followers and interactions) directly into financial capital. They can be paid for endorsing products—depending on the number of their "alliances" and likes.

But this is only one part of the picture. While narratives of the entrepreneurial self inevitably inform the design of digital platforms and technologies developed in Silicon Valley, they do not determine how such technologies are eventually used in different contexts, much like the intended design of the Texas Instruments calculator was appropriated over time. While such ideologies may be palpable to professional,

cosmopolitan elites, or to the US context, many visitors to youth clubs do not fit the mold of the entrepreneurial self who is striving to expand their social capital. Here, the concept of the digitally savvy, entrepreneurial self seems removed from the reality of everyday struggles, where LinkedIn headhunters are rarely interested in young men lacking diplomas, and Instagram fame would potentially invite discrimination, haters, and trolls rather than wealth. None of the youths I met in all my field sites ever mentioned platforms such as LinkedIn, which does not mean that the platform might not become relevant for them (it is indeed popular in business circles in Austria), but that the context in which they are expected to exhibit a certain kind of digital agency matters. Moreover, while LinkedIn played essentially no role in their narratives, personal relationships very much did: Family members, family friends, or even employment lab staff's ties to certain industries played a crucial role in the job search. Relying on LinkedIn could even seem out of place or ineffective for a variety of reasons.

In her study in northern Italy, for example, Elisabetta Costa (2022) showed that although career counselors and recruiters considered LinkedIn an effective means of self-promotion to achieve a better career, in reality it rarely led to results when there is a lack of jobs. Obviously, this led to a certain skepticism, reinforced by the fact that jobs were usually communicated through personal relationships and that if a person praised their own professional achievements online, they risked ridicule from friends and acquaintances (Costa 2022). The sociopolitical context in which such platforms are embedded is just as important here as the norms of peers when it comes to self-presentation. Self-branding platforms are neither universally socially accepted nor beneficial to all, once again demonstrating the fallacies of the blanket labeling of what constitutes digital literacy.

In some ways, the concept of the entrepreneurial self also reflects how social theorizing is itself influenced by capitalist narratives. Kathy Charmaz warns, for example, that personhood theories in the West often "assumed an individualistic, competitive, strategic and hierarchical concept of human nature that fit the 1950s North American cultural ideal of upwardly, middle class man" (2014: 156). Narratives and digital literacy policies locating these tropes in digital technologies often adopt a terminology of individuals acquiring social capital online, managing the self, and performing in Erving Goffman's (1983) performative arenas of everyday life. From this perspective, online spaces become a mirror of a competitive capitalist society in which the expansion of personal potential is exercised through online practices. Yet, this is only one possible framing of what online spaces are and ought to be. Such

distinctions, when left unexamined, may reproduce historically problematic distinctions between digitally savvy, entrepreneurial elites who navigate the internet efficiently, and those who do not adhere to these ideals and are thus seen through the lens of deficiency. Especially if the beneficiaries of digital literacy interventions are seemingly incomplete youth in a state of transition and vulnerability, waiting for adult wisdom to be imposed on them (Epstein 1998). As Thomas Stodulka highlights, following arguments by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Carolyn Fishel Sargent (1999), children and youths are "constantly juxtaposed and evaluated with regards to the lives of adults," a temporal imbalance in which children's experience is marginalized and the state of *becoming* is emphasized while their state of *being* is denied (Stodulka 2016: 76). When it comes to literacy, not just digital literacy, children and youths tend to create their own "unofficial" literacy with different objectives and rules compared to adults' "official" literacy (Dyson 2010). Literacy cannot exist without illiteracy, which is constructed as an opposition in the process of assigning literacy to certain groups and practices—"(il)literacising" is thus highly political (Alber and Kölbl 2023).[4] Unquestioned distinctions of (il)literacy and (in)efficiency reinforce the marginalization of already disadvantaged children and youth without necessarily considering the diversity of their literacies (Boonaert and Vettenburg 2011).

The simple fact that young people trying to "stand on their own two feet" are not engaged in narratives of the entrepreneurial self does not mean that their absence is a deficiency and that mindset alone would lead to social mobility and career advancement. Similarly, if some may not fit the mold of the digitally literate entrepreneurial self, this does not necessarily mean they are on the other side of this construct. They are not acting "deficient" or missing out, simply because they seem to lack the digital skills that would make them digital wizards. Wizards who ought to use digital technologies strategically and in career-enhancing ways, rather than engaging in subversive entrepreneurship on the dark web, yet whose socially acceptable digital wizardry would have little impact on preexisting kinds of divisions, inequalities, and exclusions. When contrasted with the departing fast train, some of my interlocutors seem to be lagging, but in reality they are struggling to feel grounded and make sense of the obscure, fast, and unapologetic trains around them, conjured by adults. What young people shared was more of an attempt at stabilization than a step toward the future. What comes to mind here is the metaphor used by young people in postwar Mozambique in Julie Soleil Archambault's study on mobile phone use. Her interlocutors, Archambault (2017) reported, sometimes spoke of "being adrift . . . without being moored or steered." And "yet, in their attempt

to claim authorship over their lives, they deployed much energy to make it look as though everything was running smoothly, as though they were riding the wave rather than fighting the storm or simply staying afloat" (20). The only smartphone app (besides social media apps and an occasional mobile game) that Marko used to exercise regularly was a simple app that allowed him to play music, not any of the "self-optimizing" fitness apps that tend to populate public discourses. None of those apps were necessary for him, and yet his workouts would have been nearly impossible without something as "unspectacular" as the music app.

Sometimes, in fact, "mass" entertainment can be a site of alternative imaginaries in these efforts to stay afloat. It can be a place to find a relatable story of survival and resilience instead of elitist entrepreneurial self-narratives. For eighteen-year-old Nour and his friend, both of whom I met only once, the Japanese manga and anime series *Naruto* offered such a narrative. As they sat on the couches of the youth center, Nour explained, "The series changed my life. I wasn't motivated to do much, nor did I want to go to school. Naruto showed that hard work helps. You have to do something. So I started to work out."

His friend agreed. "Naruto had a monster inside him, so the village didn't like him. Then he learned to live with it, and the village liked him again. Then everyone wanted to be friends with him. He didn't like that because no one liked him before."

For the two young men, the story of *Naruto* was not mere entertainment. Nour said, "I watched it several times. It has seven hundred episodes," but a continuous story told over and over again, with all its reassuring implications for their own lives, with all its optimism that hard work might pay off, in an environment that offers little hope and instead signals that the village does not necessarily accept their "monsters." As educational anthropologists have argued, the value placed on formal education often overlooks the creative ways in which social mobility is approached (Froerer and Portisch 2012). Sometimes a blueprint can be found in unexpected places: by binge-watching fictional characters overcoming adversity.

Conclusion

Most scholars working on issues related to digital inequalities, including myself, would agree that inequalities that exist elsewhere are carried over into the digital spheres (van Dijk 2017). Yet, many digital literacy recommendations aimed at leveling the playing field gloss over larger social mobility issues and problematic school systems that further ce-

ment social disenfranchisement. Introducing more digital literacy programs sounds promising, and such programs are, no doubt, important, but they are rarely sufficient. Even more problematically, policies that ascribe passivity to disadvantaged groups risk misunderstanding the needs and strengths of youth "floating" on the periphery. Even issuing computers and introducing digital literacy in all schools does not necessarily mean that the computers will be used in ways considered efficient, strategic, or entrepreneurial. If Faro had had a computer, it would not necessarily have changed the fact that he was stuck in limbo between a job he did not want to do and unemployment. If the entire world had conspired for David to become a gardener, a YouTube tutorial on math would do little for him to catch up with a school system that had moved on without him. If a young person dreams of becoming an electrical engineer or a car mechanic, the moment they realize it would have been essential to have good grades in math might come too late—and the only remaining, albeit still uncertain, option in the near future might be gardening, because it is written in their eyes. Branding yourself online becomes obsolete if your name is Mohammed and you are trying to gain access to the labor market, which is inhospitable to "foreigners"—unless branding means assimilation and keeping a low profile, as in Arnel's case. Instead of accumulating capital and visibility, Arnel wanted to be absorbed in a school that seemed to reject his signs of otherness. At the same time, a manipulated Google search could not make up for lack of implicit understanding of institutions of power, despite his exceptional observation skills. For Amin, the aspiring hairdresser, acquiring social capital and "becoming a man" meant separating himself from the "Austrians" and undermining their power over his labor. For Nabi, being active and efficient meant defying the odds, moving from secondary school to a private school with a Matura, and surviving being thrown off the social mobility train. Whether it is the new strength Nour found in *Naruto*, or Marko's motto that life is full of ups and downs and you have to fight through them, or even the Chechen group's adventures on the dark web, these forms of "entrepreneurial" thinking are just as crucial for survival in those circumstances where you have to find a way to stay grounded in the first place.

This chapter began the discussion of the sociopolitical conditions shaping digital practices by focusing on inequalities related to fragmented life histories, the education system, and (un)employment. This examination has offered a nod to debates on digital literacy narratives, which may inadvertently dismiss practices that do not conform to privileged modes of engagement as inefficient or lacking entrepreneurial spirit, and often overlook how digital inequalities are deeply rooted in

broader social and economic contexts. So, if my interlocutors were not constantly walking around thinking about how to become proficient, career-oriented digital wizards, what *were* they doing online?

Notes

1. The gender of the individuals was assumed based on how I read them, except for those who communicated otherwise. Having said that, I fully acknowledge the interpretative and problematic nature of this approach.
2. The controversial AI implementation by AMS is currently still undergoing legal audit.
3. A video sharing platform.
4. The history of European colonization is an example of how people's literacy skills have been derailed by the introduction of a European language in a country, and the definition of literacy in relation to that language (Alber and Kölbl 2023).

CHAPTER 2

Social Choreographies

Introduction

After the initial visits to the youth centers, several staff members responded to my research interests by pointing out that the smartphone equals competition. "Once they're on the smartphone, our job gets really difficult," one staff member told me. "Our work has changed, it's different now than it was ten or fifteen years ago. It's harder to reach out and connect with them." Initially, even for me, the smartphone paradoxically became a competitor, just as it was a focus of my study. It seemed as if the smartphone was a disruption, something "between" me and the visitors, bringing interference into my relationships in the making. The warning about the smartphone as a competitor soon began to hover over my own fieldwork as I tried to initiate a conversation with a group of teenagers hanging out on the sofas. The teenagers were often understandably more interested in their smartphones than in talking to yet another "intern."

The more familiar I became with the field, the more the shape-shifting nature of smartphones shone through as intimate yet also distant objects (as discussed at length in Jovičić [2022]). On the one hand, every interaction involving a nosy researcher interested in smartphones is also a negotiation of privacy—learning the social choreographies of when it was appropriate to ask what was done online, what I understood as privacy, and what my interlocutors considered private. Over time I observed how smartphones, with their porous design, became seamlessly integrated into conversations, making my anxiety surrounding privacy or distinctions between online and offline obsolete at times—for instance, when interlocutors chose to illustrate a point by showing me images, videos, or messages during everyday exchanges as conversation

flowed. On the other hand, my own concerns about the smartphone led me to question my assumptions about what constitutes rapport in ethnographic fieldwork—a concept often idealized and vaguely tied to notions of predigital authenticity. Engaging with my own smartphone in the field also heightened my bodily awareness of this ever-evolving, shape-shifting object. Sometimes, when sitting on the sofa and feeling left out, I longed to seek relief and comfort in my smartphone. One evening, I attended a rare disco night at the youth center. While I stood in a corner with a group of girls, the opposite side of the room was populated by a group of young men sitting next to an empty dance floor, bathing in the colorful lights of the spinning disco ball and loud music. With their heads down, engrossed in their smartphones glowing in the dark, they appeared to represent another stereotypical image of the lost smartphone generation. But seeing them next to the dance floor, obviously out of their comfort zone, reminded me of myself. The smartphone was a hiding place, a helpful tool for dealing with one's awkwardness and perhaps shyness.

Hanging Out in Digital Environments

So how does sociality unfold in these "digital environments" (Frömming et al. 2017) replete with the everyday practices of scrolling, swiping, and playing? For some scholars, digital environments are dark places of "being alone together" (Turkle 2011), where technological possibilities also pose threats to intimacy and sociality; for others, they are hostile spaces of cyberbullying, often sketched in contrast to a romanticized and seemingly authentic predigital era. Like all social spaces, youth centers, schools, *and* social media platforms have their own specific dynamics regarding shared values, conflict, and cultural and social identities. Rather than being neutral, all these sites are designed to be social, and they therefore evoke both peer support and censorship, invisibility, and exclusion. It is in this context in which digital media technologies come to life through a variety of subtle choreographies.

Inclusion and Exclusion

I met Lenny on my first day at the youth center. He was sitting at the computer across from the "bar," his huge headphones on, his back turned to us. For a moment, Can, a frequent visitor, took over the bar to make Turkish chai for everyone. Sitting on the high chair at the bar, I watched as he skillfully poured steaming tea into the tiny, elegantly

rounded chai glasses without handles. Happy to warm up because of the cold breeze wafting in from the open door of the youth center, I eagerly took the glass in both hands and revealed my ignorance by blowing on my burned fingers seconds later, attempting to drink the unapologetically bitter brown liquid without sugar while trying to suppress the grimace resulting from this mistake. Around me, Can's peers took a break from a mobile game and gathered around the bar, drinking tea and occasionally throwing their hands in the air and dancing to a familiar chorus of a Turkish song playing via YouTube. Meanwhile, Can offered tea to everyone at the bar. Lenny glanced at me and the action at the bar, then I waved him over, offering him a tea. He joined me at the bar and cautiously eyed his peers, who, I would later find out, frequently teased him. After introducing myself as a researcher interested in the use of digital media technologies and their "everyday life in general, almost like a journalist," Lenny promptly invited me to join him at the computer to watch Let's Plays—videos of other gamers playing games—where I was to spend the rest of my evening. From time to time, he held his headphones away from his ear so I could hear the sound. In the months that followed, I sat next to him for hours on a narrow bar stool while he explained the plot of a video, the storyline of a game, or perfectly translated the English text that appeared on the screen.

Lenny visited the youth center almost every afternoon and stayed until it closed. His presence was hard to miss. Most of the time, he was the only one occupying one of the old computers in the living room corner. Sitting tall on a bar stool, he stood out but was also somewhat shielded by the panels surrounding the computer. He seemed to be creating a space of solitude in an otherwise hypersocial room, seemingly immersed in his own world, at least until he allowed someone to trespass. Although he had carved out a safe space in the middle of the room, Lenny was hardly in a social vacuum. Sometimes the gameplay or anime videos, which included scenes of abstract and occasionally bloody fighting and killing, drew the attention of passersby on their way to the bar. Some of the young men from the sizable Turkish-speaking group that often dominated the space walked past it on their way to a (music-only) computer at the bar, where they could select the next song to play via YouTube. Sometimes they would also pick on him as they walked by. Erkan, a sixteen-year-old construction apprentice, was a confident character who once asked me about my salary and was relieved to learn that I earned less than he expected to earn once he was fully employed because "you really don't do that much work here." He would sometimes stop by, look over Lenny's shoulder at the video, and utter something like "that's stupid." Then he would turn to me and

question my sanity for watching these videos with Lenny. After receiving no satisfactory response from me, he would turn away and go back to his group of friends. While his "geek" interest helped Lenny connect with the gamer and anime community online, his digital preferences excluded him from that particular social island. But for me and anyone really interested in what he was doing, he opened up his safe space and let us into the universe of abstract creatures and cheery tunes that coexisted with Turkish rap music.

Erkan and his friends, most of whom visited daily, also carved out a space for themselves. They usually showed up in a group and then occupied the circle of main sofas, some sitting outside with their jackets on, ready for a cigarette break. The group's arrival was usually accompanied by an increase in music volume and a change to Turkish- or German-language rap. When they were not at the youth center or in the park, they hung out at shisha bars, as they told me. Instead of shisha and alcohol forbidden in youth centers, they entertained themselves in groups playing PUBG or Battle Royale (mobile phone shooter games), killing opponents and discussing war strategies. Casual conversations, phone calls, and cigarette breaks were incorporated into the short gaming sessions. Not much different to the shisha apparatus, smartphones are a link that strengthens bonds within the friendship circle through shared practices, in-between gossip, and affective involvement. Shisha gatherings, which have their roots in seventeenth-century Turkey, are still an essential part of gossip and socialization practices in the diaspora and beyond. Smartphones play a similar role in this particular context of in-between sociality, creating a playful circle of porous socialization. Their role is also somewhat reminiscent of teatime rituals, for instance among *samari* (young men) from Niger who, in the face of persistent unemployment, meet in *fadas*, that is, in casual social clubs "to listen to popular music, play card games and enjoy each other's company. . . . For conversation to flow smoothly, samari will tell you, it must take place around a pot of simmering tea" (Masquelier 2013: 472). For the young men, making and drinking tea becomes a "friend of conversation" (2013: 486). Similarly, in this context, computers and smartphones are simultaneously embedded in the overlapping mechanisms of peer inclusion and exclusion. They are part of shaping these intersecting social spaces, co-constituting each other (Boellstorff 2020), rather than radically altering how peers engage.

Sometimes, playing a mobile game in isolation can become a form of social participation in unexpected ways. One day when I arrived at the youth center, I noticed Daniel, a young boy, with his head down, intensely focused on the mobile game Battle Royale—sometimes ner-

vously pacing back and forth while tackling a difficult level. After a while, he approached a staff member, showed her the smartphone, and told her that he had completed the level. The employee, who was engrossed in another conversation, looked at him briefly and playfully ordered him to keep playing, then turned back to her conversation. The boy mumbled that his thumb hurt, but since this fell on deaf ears, he went back to the sofas and continued playing. As it turned out, the staff member had started the game earlier and had reached her limits in a challenging game level. She then gave the boy her smartphone to help her reach the next level—which he finally did after another hour, proud but red faced and drenched in sweat. While Daniel's intense, solitary focus on the game initially suggested isolation, it nonetheless opened a pathway into shared experience and connection within the youth center's community. Such moments of informal care and support quietly unfold around everyday needs—revealing how belonging often emerges in small acts of attentiveness and solidarity.

Peer Support, Bullying, and Visibility

Although he hung out mostly by himself, Lenny was not alone. Many visitors and staff at the youth center had known him for years. Arnel, the seventeen-year-old young man who had installed a picture of himself as a screensaver on the youth center's tablet, was one of them. One day, when Arnel was visiting, Lenny, as he often did, asked the staff if they had any food left—usually old bread and some butter, cereal, or pasta, some donated, some bought with the youth center budget. This time, Lenny had a plate of pasta, and Arnel noticed he was eating hastily. "Are you okay?" Arnel asked him.

"I haven't eaten all day, just a little in the morning," Lenny replied.

Arnel, visibly upset at the idea that Lenny might have been hungry, publicly said, "Digga [slang for a friend], I do not want my friends to go hungry. If you are hungry, let me know. I can get you a kebab or something from McDonald's, no problem, but you won't be hungry, bro. If it costs two, three euros, even five, just tell me, write me, and I'll get you something." Arnel then got up and bought iced tea for Lenny and himself, repeating his earlier statements.

It was not uncommon, especially for first-time earners, to share, buy food for friends, and give gifts to their "brothers." Often well aware of their peers' sometimes-difficult financial situation, some supported their extended kin in the youth center, underlying the status of the "big man." Arnel spent his first salary, earned as a waiter, on inviting his family and friends for dinner and on lending money to his mother. Arnel's

awareness of the wealth differences extended not only to the less fortunate among them but also to "rich Austrians," as Arnel called his friend who bought him an expensive gift for his eighteenth birthday. "He has a big house, even with a second floor. Austrians are rich. It's good to have Austrian friends," he once said jokingly. Sharing also extended to access to digital infrastructure. Erol was a thirteen-year-old boy I met only once, but who nonetheless left a lasting impression. He had a distinctive way of connecting with visitors across social groups while sharing his food and even mediating between older boys. He sat next to me, along with Tino, a twelve-year-old boy Erol had just met, and with whom he shared a passion for the popular shooter game *Fortnite*. In a few days a live *Fortnite* tournament would be staged in Vienna's city hall—open to anyone who wanted to participate, the boys emphasized. The game can be played on smartphones, but it is also a computer game popular among dedicated gamers participating in worldwide international competitions. "Are you going?" asked Erol. "No," Tino replied. "I don't have a laptop." What began as a casual conversation soon led to serious topics when Tino revealed that he has been in and out of foster homes for the past seven years. He then went on to share his devastating family history. Erol, visibly moved, offered to let Tino practice *Fortnite* on his laptop. After Tino expressed his concerns about the curfew in his foster home, Erol called the home and politely asked if Tino could return after curfew so he could practice *Fortnite* on his computer.

Mutual support also unfolded online through liking, sharing, and messaging. One afternoon at the youth center, I sat beside Toni, a seventeen-year-old apprentice plumber, while he casually scrolled through his Instagram feed. The room hummed with other visitors chatting and moving around, but Toni's attention was fixed on his screen. His thumb moved briskly, seemingly without intention, tapping likes faster than I could track.

Curious, I asked, "Why?"

He glanced up briefly, gaze still half fixed on the screen, and said, "See this guy, for example? I know him, he plays guitar."

I leaned back and took a sip of the strong Turkish tea someone had shared earlier. "Is he good?" I asked.

Toni shrugged and smiled. "I don't know. But on Instagram, you got to push your friends."

While his friend received remote notification of Toni's support, support was sometimes negotiated in person among friends. For example, some asked each other to like a picture they had just posted when they were physically together, or they took matters into their own hands by taking the friend's phone and liking their own picture on their friend's

account and then giving the phone back with a grin. Even as I observed the simple act of liking posts, it became clear this was more than passing engagement: It was a form of social care, a quiet but active way to keep friendships alive across digital spaces. Sometimes this support was spontaneous and online, while on other occasions it took shape through conversations and encouragement in the room itself.

Such public practices usually revolved around support and reciprocity and avoided overt negativity. At one point, a group of female friends was sitting at the bar of the youth center. While most of them were on their own smartphones, their scrolling and liking was every bit communal. They shared gossip, commented on new videos, and discussed private messages with the others in the circle. "And what do you do when you don't like something?" I asked after we talked about liking things online.

"You don't post anything. Maybe you don't give a like, but you wouldn't post a negative comment either," one girl replied while her friends nodded. Most of the smartphone-centered interactions I observed were focused on messaging friends and demonstrating support through quick scrolls and likes. When something was received negatively, it was often accompanied by a verbal comment among friends or shared in private messages, but it rarely extended into the public online space in this particular setting. After all, most of one's online friends were already part of extended friend groups. Thus, posting something negative could easily jeopardize existing relationships. After all, for most youths, online sites of interaction are not separate, virtual worlds (Abbott 2004; Leander and McKim 2003) but meaningful "permanent companions" (Eisentraut 2016) and sites of "full-time intimate communities" (Matsuda 2005). In this case, the digital traces left behind mirrored the youths' off-screen relationships, as peers worked to maintain social harmony in public spaces: When online and offline friendships overlap, publicly expressing negativity carries a social cost.

It is impossible to touch on how social support and exclusion unfold in digital environments without mentioning cyberbullying. Although scholars researching cyberbullying do not agree on the definition of the term (Slonje and Smith 2008), it is clear that the construct implies a distinction between offline and online bullying that is hard to maintain in reality (boyd 2010). Nevertheless, cyberbullying is often framed as a novelty that invokes a sense of urgency. Almost all workshops in the Viennese landscape of digital literacy programs and beyond addressed this issue. Throughout my fieldwork, however, not once was this topic raised by any of my interlocutors. And if it was, it was never in the specifically "online" terms. Curious, I sometimes asked about it.

"What do you mean by cyberbullying? I can turn this thing off when someone bullies me," Nino once said to me, pointing to his smartphone. "But if I go to school every day and someone attacks me physically, what can I do? I can't turn it off."

He was not the only one feeling like "real life" was a bigger problem. Over time, I became accustomed to annoyed looks and eye rolls whenever I brought up the subject, while barely anyone admitted experiencing it. Others, like Anita, a seventeen-year-old private school student, clarified that bullying was usually orchestrated by someone they knew and therefore was not perceived as particularly "cyber." As she described: "This person once started a page on Instagram where they posted stupid stuff, lies about me. But I knew who it was, so I wrote a private message that I knew who she was, and that I was going to press charges. Then the page disappeared."

This is not to say that the online world is an idyllic and harmonious place of peer support. Such a site can exacerbate bullying in a disastrous way because such posts can go viral in unprecedented ways, shared by anonymous trolls. The visual aspects of it also mean that tweaked images can make matters worse, especially for young women. Nino, who mentioned that "real life" is a bigger problem for bullying, also mentioned that he witnessed cyberbullying in the Facebook era more, as opposed to on Instagram, where such group pages are uncommon:

> I saw it in the era of Facebook. There was a lot more of this cyberbullying. There are people who made a page, for example, girl X sucks cock and photoshopped photos . . . embarrassed her. That was back then. . . . On Facebook it was a lot more, on Instagram not so much. We have matured.

Again, the point is not that cyberbullying does not exist and that it cannot be utterly devastating when it occurs, but that the problem is often portrayed as more widespread and novel than it is. Not only because online and offline practices overlap, but also because young people have their own strategies for dealing with it. Besides "maturing" or changing platforms, young people created safe spaces through surrounding themselves with a bubble of people they knew, trusted, and liked, and by blocking strangers and perceived enemies. Echo chambers, usually a term with negative connotations, work both ways—they not only exclude but also protect people from exposure. By making their Instagram profiles private, most were able to "scale" sociality (Miller et al. 2016) and self-manage their audience (see Miller et al. 2016). Such strategies were more difficult to develop in schools when bullying occurred because this was a place that could neither be avoided nor scaled. For example,

in an "offline" case of bullying, Anita had to change schools. After moving to Vienna from Bosnia and Herzegovina, she was severely ostracized in class because of her poor language skills—an experience that visibly weighed on her. For Chan, another student at the private school, whose parents had emigrated from China before she was born, school bullying was similarly traumatic. She recalled being racially insulted and ostracized at her previous school, an experience that permanently alienated her from the country where she was born. Her goal was to move as soon as possible to "somewhere where English is spoken instead of German." The stories told by my interlocutors when asked about cyberbullying often referred to wider dynamics of marginalization that had little to do with the digital as such.

These dynamics of exclusion must be considered when evaluating proficient digital practices. In 2016, the Austrian Federal Chamber of Labour study concluded that activities related to creating public profiles and publicly expressing one's opinion, including running vlogs and blogs, are more widespread among young people with higher formal educational backgrounds. The authors of the study linked this to limited digital literacy and the associated confidence to navigate these spaces (Ikrath and Speckmayr 2016). However, this is likely only part of the story. Against the backdrop of migration and integration, debates that revolve around assimilation, standing out, and being exposed can have potentially negative consequences, especially if people have already lived through experiences of exclusion for being different. Revealing too much can be risky—something that became clear during my research in the youth centers. For instance, early on in the research, one day I asked a group of teenagers if anyone wanted to conduct an interview with me. The group of six teenagers, who were all male, were sitting on the sofas along with myself and Annika, a staff member. Despite repeated prodding by Annika, the boys kept declining to be interviewed. Mehmet, aged seventeen, was the most adamant in declining an interview. After a while, he revealed the whole story behind his reasoning: "My friend's friend was at another youth center, and he told them a few things. Then, the next day, the police came looking for radical Islamists, and it was a mess. I know what you are doing. You are telling the police." Annika, shocked, tried to argue against it, but the possibility of conducting an interview with anyone in the group that day dropped to zero. In a debriefing session, staff pointed out that the term "interview" might be a loaded one, given its use in police interrogations and in a setting in which asylum seekers are "interviewed" by state officials.

This brief fieldwork moment of tensions gains deeper significance when understood as an embodied reaction of youth growing up amid

the rationalized equation of Muslim populations with potential terrorists and the consequent preventive counterterrorism measures enacted by European states. As Sanjay Sharma and Jasbinder Nijjar (2018) observe, such embodied responses are hardly surprising in an era where racialized phenotypical features are increasingly replaced by suspicion of behaviors or religious identity when linking Islam to fears of terrorism. This exposure to exclusionary content in (online) public spaces need not be overt; direct messaging platforms like WhatsApp often facilitate mundane group conversations that casually embed hateful content within jokes or seemingly innocent pleasantries (Udupa 2025).

Digital spaces can be extraordinarily public and visible, and the decision to avoid them sometimes goes beyond mere digital literacy. Arno, a seventeen-year-old who had the busy look of someone always involved in some kind of mysterious business interaction, was a tech-savvy music producer who sometimes volunteered to DJ at the youth center. When I asked him whether his tracks were on YouTube, he replied, "No, I wouldn't have the guts. There are so many haters on YouTube"—an attitude toward YouTube that many shared.

Hamed, another visitor, also mentioned YouTube when asked about cyberbullying: "Sure, there are haters. But you would have to be on YouTube for that, so I don't post anything there." In contrast to the cocooned space of private Snapchat messages and mostly private profiles on Instagram, YouTube provides a public platform to showcase one's creative work. It therefore benefits from the engagement of an anonymous audience—which comes at the price of being exposed to negativity and criticism, trolls and "haters."

In an age of influencers shaping social media publics, visibility might seem desirable and universally valuable. Yet for young people tentatively exploring emerging digital publics while they gain their digital freedom, visibility can carry particular risks, especially for migrants and racialized others. Although migrants and asylum seekers are highly visible in the media, these narratives often unfold within problematized spaces, such as portrayals linking them with criminality, inherent threat, and state surveillance (Sharma and Nijjar 2018), or debates surrounding social welfare and dependency (Martin [2021] 2023). Crucially, visibility does not equal voice and speaking for themselves (Georgiou 2018). Moreover, even self-representations can be distorted. For example, refugees taking selfies during the 2016 migration of Syrians to Europe became symbolic of contrasting expectations: The stereotypical passive refugee fleeing war and poverty versus the "connected migrant" who actively uses smartphones and remains digitally engaged en route (Risam 2018; Diminescu 2008). The act of taking selfies thus becomes voyeuristic,

with visibility acting as an antithesis to presumed suffering. Moreover, digital representations of migrants, asylum seekers, women, and marginalized groups are frequently undermined by the widespread visibility and virality of online hate speech employing heteronormative, sexist, and pornographic tropes (Udupa and Gerold 2024). When online virality is driven by strong engagement and weak moderation on social media platforms, such signals become a powerful marker of exclusion.

But even when seeking out such visible spaces, an army of friends can serve as support. The girl Arnel was dating at one point told him that she joked on the app Tellonym (an app where users can ask questions and receive anonymous responses) that she might take her own life. One user responded by encouraging her to do so. She then posted a screenshot of the anonymous response on her Instagram and shared it with her friends, mobilizing their support. They then collectively moved to Tellonym and expressed their anger about the problematic comment. In most cases reported to me, far from being victims of the dark forces of the internet, my interlocutors moved confidently in the social spaces they had created for themselves, armed with the support of their friends rather than high-tech skills that would do little to discourage haters. These strategies, however, sometimes involved conscious self-censorship and the avoidance of self-expression in public spaces, which might make them vulnerable to (online) criticism. It also did not save them from other forms of "offline" bullying, any more than Lenny's headphones and immersive games erased his exclusion from the dominant group.

It is not easy to create spaces of comfort, camaraderie, and safety when one is "out of place," whether through foreignness or genres of media consumption. Digital media and infrastructures are embedded in these microprocesses of reciprocity, alliances, and protective strategies against haters. Whether it is Lenny creating an oasis of games and anime in the middle of the room, or Arnel's ex-girlfriend mobilizing friends on social media to act as an army of supporters, headphones, games, computers, or social media help shape these spaces in ways that have little to do with an online-offline dichotomy or constructed notions of cyberbullying, but rather with the way that "out of place" is constructed in a particular context (Wolak et al. 2010). After all, places are created through the "drama of living together" (Walter 1988: 9, in Aucoin 2017: 407). Sometimes, "being out of place" also means being a girl, as the next section will illustrate.

Norms and Gender

Potentially public online spaces often reflected preexisting gendered notions of privacy and the ability to navigate public space. In youth cen-

ters and on social media alike, girls seemed particularly wary of public spaces dominated by men. For this reason, most youth centers instituted a "girls' day," where the center is open only to girls at specific times. This measure aimed to create a safe space for girls and increase the number of female visitors, who are usually significantly outnumbered. One youth center even designated a fixed room specifically for girls, where boys were not admitted. Even in the youth center without a separate room, girls could often be heard giggling in the girls' restroom for extended periods of time. The restroom had recently been redesigned and decorated, with some female visitors helping. It now included colorful patterns, a full-length mirror, and a small makeup area. The restrooms in the private school seemed to be of equal importance. Usually, my presence in the school restroom was followed by a moment of silence among the girls, who had gathered around mirrors and smartphones and usually interrupted their conversation as soon as I, the intruder, was noticed. The silence indicated that a not-so-trusted intruder had disturbed the private, sacred space that was free of boys and adults in general (female teachers, unlike me, had a special key to their restrooms).

Sociologists, for example, have often suggested that girls tend to withdraw from public spaces such as parks against a backdrop of paternalistic discourses that associate public spaces with danger and male dominance. This is consistent with Danila Mayer's observations that girls were mostly absent from Viennese parks, especially once they reached puberty—a circumstance that has led the city of Vienna to construct several *Mädchenparks* designated specifically for girls (2011: 84). Among sociologists and human geographers, such narratives warning girls against visiting and exploring public spaces have been referred to as "terror talk" (Valentine [2004] 2017; Katz 2006; Levine 2002). This "terror talk" is a particular concern for girls from less affluent families, who may not be able to participate in expensive recreational activities considered safe, as opposed to freely roaming urban spaces perceived as dangerous (Pyyry and Tani 2016). In Vienna, the "terror talk" is not rarely linked to politicized and often racialized and essentialist reports of crime associated with migrants and asylum seekers. In 2021, for instance, a widely reported murder of a thirteen-year-old Austrian girl, linked to four male Afghan suspects, resulted in her family's lawyer stating that "men from the Middle East have, from their birth on, a different relationship to sex, women and children" (Marchart, Mittelstaedt, and Möseneder 2021).

Thus, it is hardly surprising that some girls were also suspicious of online public spaces, which they sometimes perceived as marked by men's predatory behavior. After all, women, especially women of color,

tend to be overly exposed to hate speech online in general (Udupa and Pohjonen 2019) and during online games in particular (Fletcher 2022). In a nonrepresentative survey (N = 86) conducted in an interdisciplinary project I co-led (Göbl et al. 2020), we asked respondents to estimate how often they had negative and positive experiences online. Although the survey was exploratory and not representative, it appeared that girls were more likely to have negative experiences on social media. I used this preliminary finding as a conversation starter in an interview with Jana and Anita, asking them why they thought this might be the case. Jana replied, "Probably because guys always leave really stupid comments." Anita agreed. "Yes, I think so too. Guys like to be out there and write hey cutie. I mean, they can be rejected, too, but in the end, it's the girls who get harassed by it." In an interview, Nino also mentioned that he does not look for friends on Instagram, because he has enough, but when it "comes to girls, it's a different story. You have certain intentions. If you follow each other, if one of you likes something, then you go, like, hey, and then write . . . and then sometimes you meet up." While boys rarely mentioned negative experiences online and were more inclined to talk to strangers (especially if they were girls), girls frequently reported being messaged by men they did not know. They rarely responded to such messages, especially if the sender was unknown. Anita and Jana spoke of being sent "weird pictures" and messages from boys, whom they either ignored or blocked if they did not understand the first indirect sign of rejection: lack of a response. Although they were wary of such predatory practices, Jana and Anita hardly saw themselves as victims, since they could easily block strangers. After all, online privacy spheres (whether through private messages or private accounts) resemble girls' bedrooms and bathrooms, where young girls can create a private space for themselves despite online catcalling. By choosing to engage online, girls can also manage social interactions by maintaining physical distance in settings they deem dangerous. In his urban ethnography with young people in Harlem, Jeffrey Lane (2018) observes how girls often move potentially risky or performatively charged interactions with neighborhood boys to online spaces, effectively slowing down the exchange. Such subtle practices, not much different from the subtle Victorian gesture of tipping a hat to a passing lady, allowed girls to decide the next step and enabled boys to handle rejection privately rather than publicly on the street. However, Lane also notes that online spaces do not free girls from gendered expectations. Girls were still expected to demonstrate loyalty and care toward neighborhood boys online (rather than align with rival groups) and to display attractiveness to gain attention (2018: 60).

Gendered ideas are negotiated not only in the public sphere of social media but also in playful spaces, be it in games at the youth center or online games. One of the games that was almost exclusively dominated by male visitors to the youth center was poker. The staff introduced the game after downplaying its problematic association with gambling by making it a game about capitalism, where the rules of the game were accompanied by a commentary on capitalist society. At one of the games, Hatice, a confident fifteen-year-old girl wearing a headscarf, joined the game, actively encouraged by the staff member in his role as game leader or dealer. A younger boy, who had participated in the all-male poker rounds several times, looked at her angrily and exclaimed, "Why is she playing? Girls don't play poker!" She dismissed his comment and stayed in the game. The fact that she was not the first to lose her poker chips and leave the game irritated a few players. But soon after, she lost the game. The next time, a group of—once again, male—players was mobilized to play the game, Hatice refused to play. When I asked her why, she shrugged and replied, "I just don't feel like it." In the months that followed, I never saw her play poker again.

Like the poker game, the online gaming scene is still associated with male dominance and hostility toward women and LGBTQIA+ players (Denk and Mey 2021). But this in no way means that these norms cannot be challenged. Rabi, a fifteen-year-old girl who had just started attending a high school with a focus on accounting, enjoyed playing with such norms and expectations. Rabi exuded confidence and drive, and her interests were wide ranging and ever expanding: from dancing, skateboarding, regular visits to the gym, marching, drawing on her iPad, or playing around with design apps—every time she came over, always busy with her many projects, she would mention another project she had started. Her father was an engineer, and her brothers were IT developers. They inspired her to learn a programming language and use Unity, a game development tool. She intended to develop a game herself. Rabi was also an avid gamer and very aware of the social environment she was in, especially when playing shooter games.

She said, "For example, today I was playing a game, and there was a player who kept calling me 'a noob,' a beginner. I responded to that, so he realized I was a girl and was totally shocked that a girl was playing a shooter game and told me I had no business being there. He wanted to get rid of me."

"And how do you react to something like that?" I replied.

"Mostly not at all. I know they don't really know me, so I don't care."

Then I asked, "Have you ever hidden the fact that you are a girl?"

"Yes, in the beginning. But after a while, like when you're part of the search squad, you have to talk, so they notice. They don't like it, especially when I have the highest or second-highest score in the group, which happens a lot," Rabi said with a broad smile.

She then went on to explain how these reactions and expectations varied from country to country. Eager to interact and play with people from other countries, she logged on via a VPN (a virtual private network, which allowed her to change her IP address to hide geographic information).

When asked if she noticed any differences, she replied, "Oh yes, there are differences in how they think, what they say, and how they react when they lose. In some countries, like the US and the UK, they are more relaxed about the fact that I'm a girl. But on the other hand, I've heard from my friends who play *The Sims* [a real-life simulation game popular with female gamers] that boys get bullied there too."

Rabi confidently navigated the online space, also because she was exposed to digital know-how at an early age through her family. She was confident and curious, and had a broad range of gaming, data, and software development expertise. She was also able to shrug off the insults from a meta perspective and find her place in spaces dominated by male gamers, despite, or perhaps because of, the challenges involved. The ease with which she navigated these areas of expertise, inaccessible to most others I encountered in the field, was extraordinary and unusual.

The reality, however, was that young women rarely ventured into games with predominantly male players, be it poker at the youth center or video games. A Vienna-based project that ran during my fieldwork was aware of this mismatch. It aimed to involve diverse players in a district-wide PlayStation tournament, and it included a couple of youth center visitors. Before the tournament, students from surrounding schools were asked to nominate two girls and two boys from each school—to ensure that these two genders were included. The students could use the youth center's facilities to practice their game in preparation for the tournament. To ensure that enough girls participated, organizers incorporated two games into the tournament: *FIFA*—a football game and *Overcooked*—a cooking game. Ironically, the division of labor in the inclusive gaming teams ended up following traditional gender expectations: The girls played the cooking game, and the male players chose to play football. Thus, what was originally conceived as a well-intended project aimed at including girls in competitive e-sports became another signifier of a place for girls in virtual society—in the kitchen.

Both Hatice and Rabi negotiated male-dominated playful spaces in their own distinctive ways. Here, too, online and offline spaces are

not separated but are interconnected in a world where technology does not stand in a vacuum. For some first-generation migrant youths, these negotiations were particularly complex because broader societal expectations around "female" technology use became entangled with family and community pressures that often included shaming while also opening spaces for the personal exploration of freedom (see also Witteborn 2018). Digital practices are embedded in gendered notions of being and privacy, along with cultural and social notions of appropriate presence in public space. Such dynamics, however, also play out at the microscopic level or in specific social choreographies—affecting when and where smartphones are taken out of pockets.

(Dis)comfort, Belonging, and Withdrawal

Besides the more visible ways in which the digital was embedded in making and negotiating relationships, there were less obvious ways in which smartphones were used, particularly in moments of social disconnectedness. They were used to navigate social awkwardness, to signal withdrawal, or act out the desire to simply appear busy while not doing anything in particular. One of the participants in the codesign workshop located smartphones in the context of her discomfort with waiting: "You use it when you're waiting, and you don't want to look stupidly in the air." Instead of nervously fumbling with the keys in one's pocket, the smartphone offers a culturally legitimized way to be in public space while counteracting the boredom and discomfort of waiting. In addition, "fumbling around" can mask a temporary lack of engagement, participation, and belonging. Another workshop participant recalled a moment when the smartphone played such a role: "I was in a big group once, and I was sitting at the end of the table, so I couldn't join the conversation even though I wanted to. So I went on Instagram, even though I didn't feel like it." Such casual practices enable "maintaining an 'environmental knowing,' or crucial peripheral awareness of one's spatial surroundings in readiness for the busyness of life to resume" (Richardson 2010: 11). Smartphones are more than a way to deal with suspended sociality—they can also be a space where the world can be reorganized around the ego regaining autonomy and control in moments of insecurity. Elena, who I met in private school, was a reticent, introverted girl. She hung out with her friends in class but sometimes had trouble engaging in conversation. It was usually only a matter of time before she got bored of being on the periphery of the group. She would then usually pick up her phone at some point and scroll through Instagram. This could be interpreted as a way of reclaiming autonomy and sociality

on her terms, and moving from the periphery to the center of her own uninhibited explorations and asynchronous contact with other friends.

Smartphones, with all the possibilities they offer for social connection, are an obvious tool for social participation. They can, however, also help signal social absence and withdrawal as a temporary cloak of invisibility. Being "on the phone," then, can indicate unavailability while staying cool and looking busy—a somewhat legitimate kind of apparent absence. But withdrawal does not necessarily mean that refusal to participate goes unnoticed or creates an actual social vacuum. On one occasion, just before his eighteenth birthday, Arnel told me about the date he was soon going to have. Grinning, he explained that the girl was the daughter of his mother's friend. Although they had never met, he could hardly contain his excitement. The girl was described to him as a perfect match and a "decent" girl who comes from "down there" (former Yugoslavia). Arnel rehearsed what to say and was already planning where to take her on a second date. He wondered whether to invest in a proper restaurant or go for a cheap kebab at the stall, and he considered whether to bring chocolates and flowers on the first date. The next time I met Arnel, his mood was down. When I asked him what had happened, he explained that the date had been terrible. He and his mother had gone to dinner at the home of his mother's friend and her daughter, Arnel's date. Throughout the evening, the eighteen-year-old girl sat at the table with her mother and visitors, looking at her phone and not paying much attention to him or the conversation in general. A scene he had excitedly rehearsed earlier became an anticlimactic event as the girl barely spoke a word to him. Despite his disappointment, he also showed sympathy for her: "I think she was in a bad situation. Her mother was talking about a pretty bad incident with a family member at home." Despite the personal defeat, he interpreted her silence and apparent disinterest as an escape into her "cocoon" of comfort (Hjorth and Richardson 2014: 35) after a stressful day.

Retreating into such temporary cocoons creates private spaces, especially in those public moments when physical distance is not possible, whether averting a glance in an elevator (Hirschauer 2005) or commuting. Although the understanding, manifestation, and extent of privacy varies in different social and cultural contexts, the need to occasionally signalize privacy and withdraw from sociality seems to be fairly universal: be it in crowded prisons or Indonesian longhouses (van der Geest 2019). An example of how social availability is managed despite physical proximity can be found in the work of Shireen Walton (2021) in a suburb of Milan. Some of her interlocutors lived in apartment blocks that offered little privacy by design. But sometimes, they

closed their shutters despite being at home. Although this was sometimes related to temperature management, Walton argues that closed shutters are also a signal of social inaccessibility (2021: 61). Media technologies can be embedded as variable shutters in these choreographies as multipurpose projection screens that indicate where an individual's attention is focused. In another case of withdrawal management, Jo Tacchi (2012) demonstrates that listening to the radio also serves to cancel out (the sounds of) the surrounding sociality. In her later work on smartphone radios, she concludes that digital technologies can be used in a similar way to create an aura of silence—to block out sociality rather than invite it in. I would argue that this encompasses not only auditory immersion but also visual immersion through mundane practices such as scrolling. Smartphones do not necessarily take away sociality, but they can help engage in individual ways by tuning social radio channels in specific ways and by acting as conductors of attention and communication.

Sometimes, ironically, playing a mobile game alone also served to reinstate sociality. On one occasion, the poker game—this time without Hatice—included one staff member and seven boys. The players, highly focused, sat around the table, with poker chips spread all over it. One of the rules the staff member introduced was to keep smartphones away from the table. Occasional phone calls during the game were consistently sanctioned by both the staff and the other players. Hassan, a sixteen-year-old casual visitor, was the first player to lose his chips and leave the game. He sat back wearily as he disappeared from collective view. Shortly after leaving the "magic circle" (Huizinga [1938] 1956) of the game, Hassan attempted to reestablish communication by addressing one of the players still in the game. His friend, however, was unresponsive because he was focused on the game. Hassan then took his smartphone out of his pocket and opened an app: a mobile poker game, where he could play against the machine, as he showed me. In the blink of an eye, he reproduced his own "magic circle" around poker, mirroring the group to which he no longer belonged. However, the mobile poker game could not hold his attention for long and could likely not make up for his exclusion from the group. Shortly thereafter, visibly bored with the mobile game and still on the fringes of the intense magic circle to which he no longer belonged, he turned to scrolling through Instagram, another social arena that required less engaged forms of participation. Hassan's short-lived experience with mobile gaming failed not necessarily because of poor design but because its permeability made him potentially aware of the social exclusion from the poker game that was so near and yet so far. The dynamic appeal of

the game in this case was not due to brilliant, spellbinding game design, but rather to how the design related to the social fabric.

Multilateral Sociality, Porosity, and In-Between Design

Rather than being a disruption to face-to-face encounters, the smartphone inserts itself into the ambiguous spaces of everyday relatedness. My own conceptualization of the smartphone in the ethnographic encounter led me to regard smartphones through a door metaphor. Doors (or their equivalents in various dwellings) are liminal or in-between spaces of decisions and possibilities (Schwartz 1968; Vogler and Jørgensen 2004). This is where decisions are made about whether or not to let a guest in. The metaphor of the door may seem simplistic at first—it is either opened or closed, the latter signaling a desire for privacy. However, a closed door might be waiting to be opened, and an open door might signal a desire for fresh air rather than an open invitation. In this space of possibility and interpretation, smartphones transform in meaning as they become enmeshed in the social politics of everyday life. One day at the youth center, for example, I sat with Paul, a fifteen-year-old boy, and a girl who sat across from him. When the seat next to her became available, he sensed his chance to strike up a conversation. As he approached with his smartphone in hand, he commented on how "everyone is on their phones these days." Without looking up from her phone, she indifferently replied, "So what," seemingly annoyed by his presence. A moment of awkward silence followed. Shortly after, she left. He remained seated on the sofa until I invited him for a game of table tennis. The intentionality of such doors is not clear, and there is potential for trespassing. Yet, it is this ambiguity and potentiality that allows smartphones to invade everyday moments in a variety of ways.

Although the data collected were constrained by my choice of field sites, which were highly social environments and therefore excluded private engagement with the "digital" within the home, I was struck by the extent to which the digital environments bristled with sociality. For example, although smartphones can signal privacy and withdrawal, they were rarely used to do so, except in cases where they signaled conscious rejection, as in the above example, or provided a comfort blanket of sorts, in response to the uncertainties and insecurities of social interaction. More often than not, I encountered acts of mutual care and sensibilities articulated about when it was appropriate to use a phone. Taking out the smartphone in a social context was rarely a solitary act

of isolation from the group but often followed a choreography of social contagion. If someone withdrew for a moment and pulled out their phone, their peers usually followed. In school, what began as a focused collective search for a mathematical solution could quickly become a wave of smartphones crowding desks during a collective break once a precedent was set. Smartphones might come into view without disrupting communication streams or breaking sociality. Instead, they would be integrated into the space of potentiality, those present knowing full well that social conventions would not be temporarily paused just because smartphones were being used. As Marko, himself a student at this school, later explained to me in an interview, when asked if there are rules to taking out smartphones among friends, "Well, you respect each other, you listen. Except when no one is talking, then you get on the phone. But I've never had a case like that. If someone is talking, you just . . . don't do it. It's also a matter of upbringing." As Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren (2010) brought to our attention in *The Secret World of Doing Nothing*, the barely visible moments of everyday life are full of tactile and social choreographies, normative overlays, and cultural notions of public participation. Smartphones fit seamlessly into these everyday moments, opening and closing overlapping spaces of engagement as we wait "for the busyness of life to resume" (Richardson 2010: 11)—or for conversation or play to engage us when the thread of sociality is temporarily paused.

New technologies rarely fall from the sky and "disrupt," as is often implied in Silicon Valley circles that influence sectors ranging from investment to consulting. Sociality, privacy, and withdrawal are created through slowly negotiated mundane choreographies. This need not always be a conscious process; it can be subtly expressed in the remarks of parents, adults, and peers, or in subtle glances or changes in posture and tone. In Japan, for example, the advent of keitai, or mobile phones, was accompanied by concerns that the use of these devices could disrupt public spaces (Okabe and Ito 2005). Posters illustrating the appropriate use of mobile phones were put up on trains. But this example demonstrates the importance of context: It matters who the subjects of such regulating efforts are. Just after the turn of the millennium, the main target group for these measures were businesspeople traveling by train. As mobile phones became increasingly associated with young women, however, calls for appropriate mobile phone etiquette turned more aggressive (2005: 213), shifting from annoyance to complaints about wasting telephone credit on unnecessary chatter rather than work-related tasks. The narrative moved from nuisance to control and regulation, including moral undertones (213).

The way smartphones fit into practices of hanging out is not simply a matter of people appropriating technologies into preexisting dynamics. It is crucial to consider what specific qualities smartphones (and their design) have that resonates in social interactions. The ephemeral practices of scrolling or casual gaming play a significant role here (see chapters 4 and 5). The nature of such permeable practices allows communicative flows and peripheral attention to be sustained with little effort. When students in school, while doing math assignments, collectively moved to check messages, text back, scroll through the feed, or play games, these practices required little focus or engagement. They did not preclude the students noticing that a teacher was approaching or that the school bell was ringing, which signaled they were about to visit friends in other classes or participate in some other competing activity. In other words, this technology made it possible not only to maintain awareness of one's surroundings but also to maintain communication flows for extended periods of time with little effort while, in this particular case, being bored with homework. It was precisely the permeability of smartphone design (and associated apps) that enabled the integration of digital media technologies into everyday interactions, even during uneventful moments of temporary distraction. Unlike computers, whose large screens usually find a place in the corner of the household and demand full attention, the smartphone screen moves with the person: It can nestle between people having a conversation, or between the person and the bus that has yet to appear on the horizon. Like standing in line, even solitary activities can be a moment of copresence through low-effort activities like a quick scroll or message.

More importantly, from a design perspective, the ease with which smartphones enable low-effort communication in moments of absence and become porous, so that life can go on, is no accident. In 2017, while working in the private sector, I was chatting with the CEO of a Vienna-based company focused on developing games for nonentertainment activities, such as language learning or customer engagement. The office was a bright, shared space with green corners and recreational areas, and it was primarily populated by developers and an interdisciplinary group. Some employees, mostly men, parked their bikes right next to their desks. "Today," the CEO said, "it's about making mobile games that you can get in and out of quickly, that you can play while you're in the restroom or waiting in line. You can play now and pick it up later." In an age where the lines between play and nonplay, work and nonwork are blurred by technology, the success of digital products is itself defined by the skillful blurring of these lines through interruptibility (Juul 2010). The more social media and games fit into the everyday rhythms of dis-

traction, waiting, and boredom, the greater the opportunity for those who sell the potential attention required of social media and games users or players. While mobile games are a more direct example of this, the ability to play on the go has brought new business opportunities—general smartphone apps and social media in particular are an interesting example of the playful "in-between" design (Hjorth and Richardson 2014: 39). In Katharina Kinder-Kurlanda and Michele Willson's (2016) view, the casual play that is able to "fit in with other everyday activities" in the context of varying life circumstances, constraints, and needs is one of the main reasons (besides sociality and playfulness on the experiential level) why Facebook social games such as FarmVille were attractive to a wider audience, including women over the age of thirty-five. In an early study of mobile phone use in Japan, Shingo Dobashi (2005) argues that mobile phones fit particularly well into the daily rhythms of women in Japan, who used them while doing housework. Unlike PCs, which are associated with business and school, there were fewer barriers for women to using small mobile phones, amid a general fear that they would not handle the technology properly and destroy it. The phones gave them more autonomy but also reinforced their gendered role in the household because women tended to do more care labor in the family through technology use as well (Dobashi 2005).

As the CEO noted, the in-between dimensions of digital media technologies are meant to accompany everyday activities and low-effort communication playfully, without the need to focus exclusively on a game. In the previously mentioned survey we conducted, the majority of students noted that they play mobile games for less than fifteen minutes (37 percent) and between fifteen and thirty minutes (30 percent) at a time, reflecting the current trends within the industry mentioned by the CEO (Göbl et al. 2020). Qualitative responses to the question "When do you usually use your smartphone?" included in the same survey indicated nonevents such as waiting, boredom, and commuting. Sometimes the games are explicitly designed to consist of short moves, such as placing a card in a typical card game. As in the physical card game or the social chess game in the park, the pause between moves allows the social activity to continue, thus enabling multilateral sociality. One day at the youth center, two friends played *FIFA*, an elaborate football game simulation, on a PlayStation console. While they were engrossed in the PlayStation game, David, the sixteen-year-old gardener apprentice, sat on a bar stool between the sofas his friends were lounging on and the PlayStation corner. He was playing a highly simplified version of *FIFA Mobile* on his smartphone—an interactive card game. While playing the game, he occasionally observed his peers on the PlayStation playing the

original FIFA video game. At the same time, he continued to chat with his friends on the sofa, translating their conversations from Turkish to German for me. All these communication streams continued while he played the mobile card game with an absent friend. The game involved playing a card with specific characteristics (strengths and weaknesses) of a real FIFA player. He spent a few seconds selecting and placing the player card and then waited for his absent friend to make another move. In the meantime, he participated in the social events around him "on the side" (Kinder-Kurlanda and Willson 2016: 100) without interrupting the parallel communication flows and mundane activities. In other words, the design of mobile media technologies enables effortless multilateral sociality, to extend the anthropologist Daniel Miller and his colleagues' (2016) concept of "scalable sociality." Miller et al. have argued that social media audiences are easily scalable and adaptable, allowing for the customization of communication patterns and intentions. Building on this concept, Elisabetta Costa, Marc Esteve-Del-Valle, and Berber Hagedoorn (2022) similarly introduce the concept of "scalable co-presence" to emphasize how intimacy and emotional proximity are also scaled through online practices, for example, when certain content is shared in a more intimate WhatsApp group. But I would argue that this expansion is not only vertical, from sender to receiver, but also horizontal and multilateral. Thanks to mobile design, communication streams simultaneously flow, intersect, and merge. In this context, scaling is not always a deliberate, clearly labeled action that follows linear communication flows. Instead, it is often a form of multilateral sociality enabled through intentionally porous, in-between design.

David's online activity was not an irresistible escape into an immersive virtual space but a choreography of online and offline that depended on both his creativity and the porous design of the smartphone. Rather than being detrimental to sociality, it enabled participation in multiple intersecting social spaces. The perception of limited sociality in such a case would be barely more than that—a perception that refers to one's own personal history, in which sociality might have looked different, and which has little overlap with his point of view. The original *FIFA* video game that David's friend played could only include two players on the PlayStation console at any one time. Playing one's own mobile game was a form of casual, parallel participation that required no excellent gaming expertise, effort, or spatial commitment. Gaming spaces are embedded in a multiverse of online and offline communication flows and social norms. David's experience of playing the mobile game was co-constituted by the social setting in which he could effortlessly participate despite being excluded from the PlayStation game. Similarly, the

seemingly solitary play of Daniel, the boy whose thumb began to hurt after playing a game for a staff member, was co-constituted by the setting in which he agreed to use his skills for someone else. As much as the games generated exclusion (for example, given the limited number of players using the console), they also generated participation in unexpected ways. The appeal of such games is not just in their "captivating" design but also in the ways they are integrated into everyday practices and social exchanges. The in-between space is attractive, not necessarily because it is blurred but because it is interdependent—because it allows the online and offline, and the playful and nonplayful, to seamlessly envelop the user without disrupting the sociality and dynamics of hanging out. Blurry suggests messy and random, but those descriptors do not do justice to the intentions of the designers and developers, who are well aware that the "in-between" has potential. It is by designing a seamless fit between the online and offline, and the playful and nonplayful, that smartphone-related practices become "mundanized" (Willim 2017) and "domesticated" (Berker et al. 2005). Such design thrives on snippets of attention scattered between online and offline worlds, rather than demanding full attention and commitment to be either here or there.

Conclusion

Digital environments—including youth centers, schools, and online spaces mediated by smartphones—are deeply relational environments in which the dynamics of hanging out can unfold regardless of how they are mediated. Here, computers and especially smartphones seep into the rhythms of everyday relational negotiation, whether by simply fiddling with phones when fingers are looking for something to do, engaging in low-effort communication, or simply existing as spaces to dwell in. Particularly in the buzzing environment of youth centers, the background chatter and noise of shared YouTube videos, the rattle of billiard balls and simulated cheers of *FIFA* commentators, the scent of chai tea and sight of Instagram pictures of food, and their parallel games of online and offline poker all formed a space in which sociality unfolded. Porous digital technologies and smartphones were not disruptive forces—a crude projection over social relations and conventions—but were integrated into multilateral social dynamics, subtle choreographies, and nonevents of everyday life. But they were also porous regarding preexisting dynamics of exclusion related to the cost of visibility and participation for women, queers, migrants, or refugees. This chapter, continuing its exploration of the sociopolitical conditions shaping digital practices, has thus fo-

cused on the subtle, embodied, and yet political social choreographies that unfold within the daily negotiation of social norms. The examples mentioned in this chapter have emphasized digital practices in attunement with others. But what happens when this attunement to the outside world breaks down, and a world full of rich choreographies turns into the empty time of boredom and nothingness?

CHAPTER 3

Doing Boredom

How long the same things? Surely I will yawn, I will sleep, I will eat, I will be thirsty, I will be cold, I will be hot. Is there no end? Do all things go in a circle? . . . Night over—comes day, day night, summer gives way to autumn, winter presses on autumn which is checked by spring. All things pass that they may return. I do nothing new, I see nothing new. Sometimes this makes me nauseous.

Seneca, Roman philosopher (4 BC–AD 65)

Introduction

Clocks featured prominently in youth centers, schools, and labs. Rather uninspired devices typical of public institutions, round and white with black lines, their sterile presence on the walls quietly and regularly announced the changing setting and rhythms. At school, the screech of the bell was timed to the minute hand of the clock. The bell pierced the indiscernible classroom chatter, declaring disorder. Suddenly, the students' languid movements, milling about and discreetly searching for solutions to their homework, exploded as groups scattered in all directions and spilled out into the hallways. In the employment labs, adhering to the clock meant the difference between receiving payment for the day or having to go home. It loomed over the group, who finally escaped school to find the clock having even a stronger, even more consequential presence. In the youth centers, the clock playfully announced the change of age groups, sounds, and activities. At times, the cheerful children's song "Wer hat an der Uhr gedreht" ("Who Wound the Clock," the song written in German for the animated series *Der rosarote Panther* [*The Pink Panther*]) echoed through the center at 6 p.m. each day, reminding the younger children that it was time to leave. Periodically, some tried to lie about their age so they could stay longer, while

others rummaged excitedly for their jackets, which they had previously tossed into the corner, and were now throwing others' jackets into the air or onto nearby plant pots. When the clock dial moved past 6 p.m., the scene gradually calmed down, allowing the staff to take a cigarette break while, one by one, the youths older than sixteen entered. During the winter season, we would sometimes see the early arrivals through the large glass doorway, nervously jumping up and down to warm up before being admitted at exactly six o'clock and not a minute earlier. On one such day, as the waters calmed after the tumultuous 6 p.m. transition, I noticed a ten-year-old boy sitting on the sofas next to the door with his jacket on. A while earlier, he had been running around the youth center with his peers. Now he sat alone, seemingly bored and engrossed in his smartphone. The "Wer hat an der Uhr gedreht" song had long since been replaced by Turkish rap music. I saw him out of the corner of my eye while continuing to play a board game with a group sitting on the sofas. The clock dial stretched past 7 p.m. when the boy quietly began to cry. When staff approached him, they found that his mother had promised to pick him up but never showed up. She knew he was at the youth center but decided not to pick him up until later—something she did from time to time without letting him know. In instances like these, scrolling turned into something else. It became interwoven with family troubles, unemployment, hopelessness, and fragmented life stories.

The ease with which the in-between smartphone design, with its endless interactions and the low-effort communication it enables, can fill the dull moments of everyday life is obvious (see chapter 2). Dwelling on the smartphone is an effortless way to escape the dullness of commuting, waiting, or social withdrawal; in other words, it is an ideal space of dwelling while "doing nothing in particular," as many young people described it, in a similar vein to Marko. Yet, as the scene described here demonstrates, there are moments when "doing nothing" begins to weigh heavily, when it becomes a reminder of absence and neglect, of stagnation. One particular manifestation of idleness that was particularly prevalent during fieldwork was boredom in all its phenomenological and discursive facets—be it boredom mentioned in the same breath as homework, boredom that creeps in during a repeated run-through of the same card game while nothing is happening at the youth center, or boredom during a tedious job or while waiting for one.

Boredom

I first noticed "boredom" as a descriptive term when I started asking the admittedly clumsy question "When do you use your phone?" during

sofa hangouts or codesign workshop discussions. "When I'm bored" was one of the most prominent responses to this question, often linked to "doing nothing."

"I'm on my smartphone when I'm bored and have nothing else to do," replied one student.

For another workshop participant, the boredom that drove him to be on his smartphone went a step further than normal boredom: "Most of the time, when I'm extra bored, I go through the Instagram feed for the tenth time, even though I've already seen everything." I was not alone in observing the role boredom plays in young people's narratives related to smartphones. In 2019, saferinternet.at (the Austrian partner of the EU-wide Safer Internet initiative) conducted a (nonrepresentative) survey among Austrian young people in which they found that 84 percent of the participating youths said they spend their time on their smartphones when they are bored (saferinternet 2019). Boredom also takes center stage as an emotion that triggers regulation through smartphones in research on smartphone addiction, where smartphones are examined as a means of managing emotions ("emotion regulation") (Wadley et al. 2020). This observation is neither surprising nor new, be it in the context of bored aristocrat women reading novels or children using their mobile phones while bored during long car journeys, wishing to be elsewhere (Green and Haddon 2009). It seems too obvious, but therein lies one of the central puzzles of this book—why is time spent online so widely regarded as wasted if it helps manage boredom? Perhaps, I would argue, one of the answers lies in the question of who those being bored are and how legitimate their boredom is.

Boredom also found its way into my fieldwork reflections. From time to time, I found myself in a youth center that went silent on some days for reasons no one could understand or predict, and sometimes I found myself on the sidelines of conversations and interactions. In those moments the white clock looked down on us, holding the reins of time. On these occasions, I found myself looking at the clock more often than usual, intently following the dials' slow movements, waiting for a shot of oxygen that would invigorate my brain cells as soon as I hopped on my bike and rode through the night to jot down my—on these particular days—sparse field notes. Time passed slowly—a feeling that the German word *Langeweile* (literally: *long time*, meaning *boredom*) captures well. In contrast to words that describe a mood such as melancholy, the German term, which has been used since the eighteenth century, refers to a feeling of prolonged time (Dalle Pezze and Salzani 2009).

Yet these were not the main reasons I chose to focus on boredom. As the months passed, and I had many conversations about everyday life, school, work, and dreams for the future, of long waits in limbo for an

apprenticeship, for a job, for a life to resume—these narratives began to coalesce into a larger category that I came to regard as "chronic boredom." I met many young people who were frustrated because of their waiting, sometimes for several years: youths who had experiences with debt or with failed attempts to leave the parental home. Many spoke of long periods of "doing nothing" and of ritualized visits to the employment office that included conversations with psychologists to "fix" them for the job market. It seemed that boredom permeated the state of "floating" (see chapter 2), where time stands still and the future is on hold. This type of boredom is similar to what other scholars have called existential boredom, which encompasses a broader, socially constructed sense of alienation and emptiness as opposed to the occasional, short-lived experience of boredom (Toohey 2012). Lars Svendsen (2005) distinguishes between (a) the momentary, transient experience of boredom, whatever that means in a particular context, and (b) a long-term existential discrepancy between one's notions of a meaningful present—and the future, in which the present fails to live up to those notions. Amid this chronic boredom, the clock dissolved into something more abstract—something that included, but also went beyond, temporary withdrawal from the world and subsequent Instagram scrolls to fill the time of "extra boredom." This kind of boredom was embedded in larger dynamics of marginalization and therefore offered a fresh kind of clarity on the in-between digital practices considered here. While the entanglement between boredom and smartphones is not reserved for marginalized users, there are certain dimensions of boredom (both as a construct and an everyday experience) that resonate with the themes highlighted in chapter 2, which covers (digital) inequalities.

Boredom as a Theoretical Concept

Boredom is a fascinating concept. Defining, interpreting, and contextualizing boredom in the European context has been a philosophical and literary concern for centuries (Dalle Pezze and Salzani 2009; Goodstein 2005; Svendsen 2005; Toohey 2012). For example, existentialists, including Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, viewed boredom as a consequence of modern life. Psychologists, however, have been primarily concerned with understanding, measuring, and dealing with boredom in individualistic, positivist terms (see Farmer and Sundberg 1986; Van Tilburg and Igou 2011; Mann 2016; Vodanovich and Watt 2016) while also linking it to psychological dysfunctions and mental health problems (Ros Velasco 2020). In psychological scholarship, boredom is often associated with a range of behavioral problems, as presented, for

example, in the research summarized by the psychologist James Danckert and the neuroscientist John D. Eastwood (2020). The studies these authors cite are generally laboratory-based and usually culturally insensitive attempts (as the authors themselves point out) to measure the subjective experience of individuals who associate boredom with (1) a risk for unhealthy eating habits, in addition to increased use of alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs; and (2) an increased likelihood of hostility, extreme political views, anger, aggression, and higher risk-taking and impulsive reactions in general. Although such an approach helps to understand the affective dimensions of boredom, the psychological perspective alone does not provide an understanding of the livelihoods in which boredom occurs, as various anthropological studies have demonstrated in relation to boredom (see Eräsaari 2017; Frederiksen 2017; Janeja and Bandak [2018] 2020; Mains 2007; Masquelier 2013; Matošević 2021; O'Neill 2017b; Sutton, Vigneswaran, and Wels 201;) and waiting (Hage 2009; Janeja and Bandak [2018] 2020; Sutton et al. 2011). The anthropologists Marguerite van den Berg and Bruce O'Neill, for example, analyze boredom in the context of social suffering, as they emphasize that "'having time' can be a cause of social suffering and 'doing nothing' can, in fact, be a characteristic of life on the margins." It "takes a form of lost autonomy, prolonged waiting, or a diminished capacity to produce and to consume" (2017: 7).

This feeling can be all-encompassing and deeply embedded in the environment. Stefan Wellgraf's (2018) ethnography of a *Hauptschule* (a secondary school usually attended by students who do not carry on studying for a high school diploma) in Berlin, Germany, poignantly describes this pervasiveness. For Wellgraf, boredom is neither an emotion nor an affect but a "negative mood or an atmospheric discomfort" (2018: 22, my translation) that lingers in the classrooms of the Berlin school attended by disadvantaged youth and labeled as "problem schools." It not only manifests itself in the pupils sleeping on the school desks but seems to be embedded in the landscape. The decay of the buildings and the overgrown grounds, which offer little distraction for pupils, not only are indicative of the decline in funding that has accompanied the increasing number of immigrant children but also contribute to the embodied sense of boredom and alienation. Time spent in class is perceived as agonizing and pointlessly boring in its entirety. Wellgraf highlights how this feeling is rooted in a school system that not only fails to engage and motivate students but also reproduces shame, stigmatization, contempt, and feelings of inferiority that students internalize in this environment; and most importantly, it often results in students being unable to find work or an apprenticeship and having to rely on benefits—a life they

see most of their parents leading, which is not conducive to motivation. The lack of motivation is exacerbated by poor grades that are used by desperate teachers to discipline, but these quickly become inflationary and lose their purpose. In such a context, school becomes a place where time passes reluctantly. As Wellgraf writes, the bells announcing breaks do not signify in this school a period of relaxation from the discipline and order present in the classroom. Instead, the entire slow time is permeated by a feeling of passivity that is desperately interrupted by aggressive provocations or "goofing off" (*herumblödeln*) (22). My conversations with youths suggest that, much like in Wellgraf's "problem school," the atmospheres of alienation and resignation experienced by young people while navigating school, early employment, and the associated institutions, are deeply rooted in structural conditions that continually shape their sense of belonging, motivation, and future.

Most social scientists dealing with boredom refer to it as a "trigger for engagement in meaningless and destructive practices" associated with killing time and related practices such as "substance misuse, promiscuity, vandalism, depression and violence" (Musharbash 2007: 313). Yet, as Musharbash points out, killing time can also include harmless practices. Musharbash argues, based on her research with the Indigenous Warlpiri community in Yuendumu, Australia, that Warlpiri ways of "killing time" involve harmless revolts against the time regimes of settlement life. In Yuendumu, "cruising" and "looking for something to happen" are ways of indulging in unstructured time. This can include older women playing card games and gambling, or teenagers binge-watching TV for days on end. She notes,

> At Yuendumu, practices of "killing time," rather than being triggered by boredom, are aimed against the same circumstances that create the potential for existential boredom. Accepting that people "kill time" not because they are bored but as a reaction against the circumstances that also generate boredom means problematizing the explicit link between boredom and "trouble" in some of the literature. (2007: 314)

In Musharbash's view, boredom emerges when imagination of what might be fails to correspond with the circumstances, similar to Elizabeth S. Goodstein's framing of boredom as a discrepancy between reality and imagination (2005: 124). Similarly, in this book, boredom is not a philosophical discourse or a psychological construct but mainly both an analytical and ethnographic category that attempts to capture the diffuse dimensions of life on the margins when the imagination of the future stagnates.

The notion that boredom causes problems among young people is a relatively recent development when viewed from a historical perspective. Boredom as a philosophical concept was explored by Roman philosophers, including Seneca, who complained about everyday routines and likened them to nausea (Toohey 2012: 13). In medieval Europe, boredom was attributed to the clergy, who spent their time in meditation and contemplation in monasteries, sometimes complaining about the "midday demon" of acedia, a sinful and detrimental moral state that empties the world of meaning and distracts the clergy from true spiritual work (Toohey 2012: 107). In later centuries, boredom is found in European narratives about the aristocracy who could afford to be bored while confined within the royal walls. The construct of boredom has been gendered since the Middle Ages, as aristocratic women enjoyed few public roles and were confined to the household, but they were expected to engage in productive pastimes by learning the art of drawing, the piano, or the French language (Toohey 2012: 93). Indeed, in the nineteenth century, Western literature introduced bored aristocratic characters such as Jane Austen's Emma—women who did not participate in the public roles reserved for men and the domestic roles reserved for servants (Velasco and Provolt 2020). Meanwhile, the working class became associated with labor and sweat, in contrast to the bittersweet world of boredom within decoratively adorned aristocratic walls. As industrialization began to reshape society, the precariousness of the workforce increased, and with it, boredom was attributed to marginalized, young, predominantly male workers (Musharbash 2007; Goodstein 2005; van den Berg and O'Neill 2017). Boredom ceased to be associated with higher social classes and began to exhibit potentially dangerous fissures as it became increasingly associated with risk and anger among disengaged, primarily urban youths. Boredom became a character flaw still often associated with laziness and a lack of curiosity (Poole 2020)—sentiments that arguably resonate with efforts to promote active and efficient media use.

From an ethnographic perspective, boredom can refer to a set of ethnographically valuable practices and everyday choreographies that help to understand what happens in such in-between moments. Yet, defining boredom exclusively in terms of practices is risky territory, as Bruce O'Neill (2017a: 25) has warned against. In his view, this approach sometimes leads to an overly optimistic view of boredom, because it can inspire the researcher to understate people's own descriptions and thus fail to capture the frustrations of boredom. O'Neill, who conducted research among Romanian informal parking lot attendants in Bucharest, cautioned against overstating practices associated with boredom

and hastily ascribing meaning to it. His informants spent much of their time hanging out in the parking lot while serving as informal security guards and occasionally helping to direct cars. But while their day was structured on the surface by routine practices, O'Neill questioned what might be missing from that picture. He invoked the idea of a photographic negative by pointing out that there are parts of the image that we do not see. Hence, an inverted image sheds light on what is absent from the image. O'Neill's informants structured their lives through repetitive daily rituals, but they still lived in a state of fear and uncertainty. They lived in a squatted house, and yet they knew that this is not a home or a long-term solution. They might have shared a cigarette or a sip of Coke at the end of the day, but they were aware of their exclusion from the shiny spaces of urban consumption. There is value in locating absences and frustrations represented by boredom, not necessarily only represented through visible, productive practices of boredom. Samuel's routines exemplify this point.

Rejection, Waiting, and Unemployment

The sense of limbo of waiting and inertia, or "floating," as the youth center staff described it, struck me most in my ongoing conversations with twenty-year-old Samuel, the proud recipient of a haircut from the youth center staff in preparation for a job interview. Samuel, a daily visitor to the youth center, was estranged from his parents and lived in a small apartment funded by welfare. He had struggled to find a job for several years since completing his vocational training as a draftsman. Throughout the fieldwork period, his visits to the youth club were marked by frustrated reports of repeated rejections and a few moments of hope when he made it to the second round, followed by repeated disappointments when his hopes faded: "Between finishing my training and now, I wrote at least five hundred applications. Only about ten percent got a rejection; others wrote nothing at all. That is the worst." Samuel was stuck in an endless loop between hope and disappointment, and a feeling of stagnation was palpable after a while. As the months passed, I stopped checking in for any updates. His resigned expression and sunk shoulders said it all.

Samuel was in a situation that some of the participants in the employment labs were likely to find themselves in after completing the program. Many of the young people interviewed had already experienced rejection during their participation in the lab—with potential employers either rejecting them or, worse still, not responding at all. The lack of responses in particular was mentioned by young people who seemed

confused about the silence and wondered what was wrong—was it them, something they had written, or the way they had written it? Not knowing if the issue was in the language or personal inadequacy added to the general insecurities and fears of failure when it came to applying. One participant, who sent out around seventy applications, admitted that "it was really stressful because really few people want to invite you or reply. Maybe they don't like the layout or whatever." He also admitted that he found it "very tiring, and also sad sometimes, when I actually really liked the job. But it's even worse when you've been on trial and still weren't accepted." Some, often with the help of lab staff who explicitly helped them deal with the issue of rejection, treated applications as a routine task with an uncertain outcome, a task that simply must be dealt with. For others, the constant rejection, especially when it was prolonged, affected their motivation. One lab staff member summarized that the lack of responses to applications creates the feeling that one's efforts are disappearing into a "black hole": "The feeling is often that it somehow ends up in a black hole. Feedback from employers is rare. Then, the invitation to an interview is even rarer. It all seems to have very, very, very big hurdles for them, very opaque and not very motivating for them." One lab participant, who used to be a student at a prestigious school but left due to the pressures he faced, admitted that he had already sent out many applications for an apprenticeship before deciding to go to university instead:

> I had agreed with my father that I would somehow write thirty applications in a month, and of course I worked my ass off every day. But . . . in the end, I didn't get anything back anyway. And as time went on, it became less and less likely. I think I'd sent around thirty or forty before I decided to study instead. Of which I got two replies. That was veeeeeeeery, veeeeery demotivating.

Ironically, rejection can hurt even more if it comes from apprenticeships one applied for but does not want to do. This conundrum arose from the requirement of the employment agency to send a certain number of applications, and thus to perform a bureaucratic feat just like Faro, a young person for whom I helped write applications to construction companies to satisfy the employment agency. This irony was shared by one of the participants in the lab:

> So, I think that's where I'm different from the others. Simply because I sent out so many and most of them were just because I had to do it and not because I said I wanted to go to the company. And in the end, I got

> even more rejections, and that just wasn't a good feeling. And the few companies where I didn't get any, for example at [company name], I didn't pass the apprenticeship test or something. . . . Yeah, that wasn't so nice.

The fear of anticipated rejection can have a paralyzing effect even before an application begins, especially for anxious individuals. One research participant noted how this affects her:

> I still have the fear that, I don't know, that I won't be accepted. That's a bit psychological again; these premonitions that you make when you can't know what's going to happen. So I think that's more what's holding me back a bit. The fear of not being taken on. Because you find the company, and then you write to them, and then you don't get in, and of course you're sad. That's happened to me quite a few times. . . . That's also my problem, that I'm really sad when I get a rejection or no message at all. I've had that too.

For young people like Samuel, outside of structures such as the employment lab (which is usually attended for up to a year), what remains is waiting through rejections. Yet, doing nothing in the context of waiting does not mean that there are no routines and practices. After all, doing nothing (and the identical expression in German, *Nichtstun*) includes "to do" as a verb. While waiting, Samuel, for example mentioned how he "worked [his] ass off." Writing applications and waiting for replies all require daily organizational and affective work, work that for Samuel stretched over several years and over five hundred applications. When asked about his routines, Samuel noted that he had daily routines and that his girlfriend, who had just moved in with him, disrupted them by staying up late and waking him up. "Did you play any video games today?" I inquired, knowing that he was an avid gamer.

"No," he said, "I ran some errands and wrote applications."

Typically, Samuel spent an hour a day writing job applications, performing a routine activity in a situation characterized by frustrations and long waits. If this image were reversed (O'Neill 2017a: 25), his routines might appear as meaningful practices that should not be disturbed (by his girlfriend), but they are also a painful reminder of stagnant time and failure that materializes with each successive routine application; a reminder of rejection and, even worse, silence. The kind of boredom at stake here is chronic—a persistent, lingering state that extends far beyond fleeting moments of mild disengagement while waiting for the bus or social interactions to pick up again.

The time that passes in the context of *Langeweile* has different qualities depending on the context of waiting beyond the distinction between temporary and prolonged waiting. For example, in her essay "Sense of Waiting Among Tibetan Nomads," Gillian Tan (2009) describes how nomads she encountered followed natural rhythms when moving for pastures. These movements also included longer pauses and days filled with waiting. Nevertheless, the nomads did not see it as being stuck, even if they had to wait a long time for spiritual authorities to determine the starting time according to the stars. For them, waiting was a dynamic process that was deeply collective, relational, and improvisational. As they waited, they were attuned to the movements of others and to the environment, based on circular natural rhythms. Because of this circularity, waiting was perceived as having no end point and was a natural part of the flow of time rather than an interruption of flow. Tan contrasts this with waiting in a queue, which is linear and follows a clear sequence, or waiting for a doctor's appointment, where time is given up and there is probably a point at which waiting becomes a waste of time through perceived inactivity: "We feel impatient with waiting because we believe we have been placed out of sync with the time of others" (2009: 44). When climate change, for instance, disrupts these cycles through delayed rain, as in Rosemary Robins's (2009) study in Australia's Goulburn Valley, waiting takes on a different meaning when technologies and choreographies of waiting are disrupted. At the same time, the sense of agency and control diminishes when control shifts from farmers to governments, bureaucrats, or scientists (Robins 2009).

In the context of the waiting youth I encountered, time was no longer synchronized with expected time. In contrast to the Tibetan nomads, whose awareness of the movements of others lead to their own movements, young people's perceptions of their peers' movements led not to movement but to stagnation. Here, waiting becomes precarious, out of sync, with unclear horizons after the wait is over, if ever. As with Australian farmers, control is handed over to the state, which holds the reins of social welfare. This "existential waiting," as Peter D. Dwyer (2009) calls it in reference to Lars Svendsen's (2005) distinction between situational and existential boredom, is timeless and meaningless, but above all irreversible in cultural contexts in which time appears linear and consumable. This notion of "existential waiting" resonates with the experiences of boredom reported by the young people I encountered, where stagnant time and uncertainty about the future created a pervasive sense of dislocation—moments when waiting stretched beyond the immediate into a condition of temporal suspension deeply felt in their everyday lives.

Doing Boredom and Unemployment

Even in the short time available to young participants in employment labs, between leaving school or becoming unemployed and starting in the lab (rarely longer than two to three months), many reported that they were bored. One participant who spoke about a time when he waited for two to three weeks described this time as follows: "I have to say quite honestly that it was really very boring sitting at home doing nothing." Another young man who waited several months noted that even the work was better than the boredom: "As I said, it was very boring because I didn't know what I could do with my time. I just sat around at home and did some research; that was the only thing I did. I'd prefer to go work, to be honest." This willingness to escape boredom led him to join an employment lab that focused on tasks that did not interest him. When asked why he did not pick a lab that was closer to his dream job as a mechatronics engineer, he replied: "It would have been better, but at the time I had no other choice because it was full. So I thought I'd just go here. Instead of sitting around at home." Another lab participant felt similarly—although the lab underwhelmed him and led to a different kind of boredom, he appreciated that it helped "kill time." In his words: "So for me, I would say it helped me . . . it helped me pass the time I had to wait for an apprenticeship. It was nice. It wasn't unnecessary."

The sudden emergence of free time can lead to boredom being experienced as ambivalent, at least initially, before it becomes chronic and all-encompassing. One lab participant, for example, called it strange:

> It was a strange time. I basically liked this time. I was bored but somehow also not. And the only thing I find really negative about it is that when you're supposed to or want to go out again, it's just really hard because you're used to doing nothing all day. . . . I changed so much and wasn't going out anyway. Now I'm no longer going out much, and I've been able to deal with it better since then. But in general, it's not pleasant.

Like Samuel, he is "doing" boredom, enveloping it in routines, which, in turn, makes breaking out of them tedious—something some of the young people reported, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, because they had become accustomed to "doing nothing." For others, these weeks or months of disorientation can turn dark. For one lab participant, who waited three weeks before finding a place in an employment lab, the wait quickly became unpleasant: "Well, you're at home a lot, you think a lot, perhaps about not-so-pleasant topics . . . and then maybe the weather is also bad." Another participant similarly reflected on how the waiting triggered depression: "I did nothing, because I did

not feel well. I had depression. Actually, I have it now too, but I could not do anything then. That is why I went to the doctor first, and then I continued searching for apprenticeships and jobs."

Regardless of their length, these practices and routines of boredom take place in a different time frame when waiting becomes chronic. It is hard to escape the stillness and grip of slow time within "boredom" when one has limited control over one's own present and future while "growing up" in a context where everyone else seems to be getting ahead and peers are picking up their diplomas, earning their first salaries, and, like Armin, thinking about independence and marriage. Instead, some find themselves at a dead end, like David after his failed short gardening apprenticeship; or Cem, who has been confused by the job center and potentially faces a future full of temp jobs (chapter 2). For some, those few weeks or months of waiting and being bored can turn into years once they reach the end of such state-funded measures. Marco, the twenty-two-year-old avid gamer who referred to me as "the internet woman," reported that he finally started a new job as a retail clerk, which he found with the help of his family member. Before starting the job, he spent one year applying while living with his grandmother. As we both leaned on the counter top of the youth center bar his visit, I asked him about that period in his life. He replied, "A year is pretty bad when you have nothing to do. It just felt really long. I didn't get invited to interviews either. I didn't know what to do with myself. It's really hard to find anything these days." In addition, externally imposed routines can reinforce disengagement and feelings of stagnation. Marco, in order to receive unemployment benefits, not only had to report regularly to the AMS (the employment agency) but also had to attend job application trainings. "Thank God I was able to stop my AMS course," he said, as he waved the unpleasant thought away.

When I asked why, he replied, "Because they are pointless. They teach you things you already know. For example, how to do job interviews. But I've done enough of that." While there were few distractions other than his impressive game collection, the need to adhere to government-organized time structuring was not perceived as a relief or as time with a purpose. Instead, it was a pointless exercise in lost autonomy, a farce that would not change the limited availability of jobs. With the recent increase in projects like employment labs, the periods of "doing nothing" at home have certainly been shortened, but also only postponed for those who fail to find something after completing it.

Here, surplus time was not a matter of leisure, as this would imply that there is a break from work, but a matter of boredom in which the "present becomes oppressive, like a cage in which one is caught, in

which one experiences the same thing over and over again without any possibility of escape" (Musharbash 2007: 313). This symbolic limbo also involved the Sisyphean bureaucratic exercises of structuring loose time. The insights presented here resonate with the famous 1933 Austrian study of the long-term consequences of unemployment among Marienthal residents,[1] which was to define social science methodology for years to come. The study investigated the social and psychological impact of mass unemployment on an Austrian working-class community after its main factory shut down in the early 1930s, resulting in a very high percentage of unemployed people. For the residents of the small town not far from Vienna, not only did their time slow down, but so did their literal walking pace, according to researchers who measured the walking speed in the community. Leisure time was perceived as a burden in some cases, and doing nothing structured the day, as the researchers found in surveys of time use and daily activities. Hanging out in the parks and being "bored and unhappy" is also how the young people Danila Mayer encountered in Vienna's parks, who returned to the parks after losing their jobs or while waiting for an apprenticeship, described themselves. They longed to find their former places of carefree play, but instead they found that hanging out in parks had become a signifier of failure, loneliness, and disconnection from society, where there is "too much time, and nothing to fill it with" (2011: 142). In a similar vein, studies with refugees in recent years have frequently addressed waiting as empty time in a liminal state neither here nor there—a state characterized by boredom and anxiety (e.g., Conlon 2011; Eriksen 2020; Griffiths 2014; Haas 2017; Lennartsson 2007). Boredom, in this case, becomes not simply a substitute for doing nothing due to there being nothing else to do, but rather an existential moment in which the future seems uncertain and slowly emerging, and in which the ability to aspire (Appadurai 2004) is threatened.

Doing Boredom and Employment

Boredom does not mean that there is an absence of something to fill the time; it can also result from boring activities. Chronic boredom is not reserved for those waiting and looking for a job or apprenticeship. It can also be an inherent part of the precarious working conditions in the temporary employment universe. Sinan was twenty-six years old, a former youth center visitor, and a bricklayer. On the day I met him, he was wearing a leather jacket and a gold necklace. While drinking juice at the youth center bar, he began to tell me about his work. Since the construction site was only active during the summer season, he had to

find another job for the rest of the year. "Long contracts are pretty rare, so you have to improvise," he said, smiling. In the offseason, he worked as a security guard for an (nonunionized) agency specializing in temporary work—an agency known for exploitative contracts. This time he was assigned to a hospital, which he liked, although he found it boring. There, he had to walk constantly, even if he was positioned in a fixed place. He was not allowed to sit down and had to permanently appear busy and agile "even when there is nothing to do," as he put it. For Marcela, a twenty-three-year-old former visitor who immigrated from Romania, boredom at work led her to quit her job in a kitchen because it was "boring and dull." She then trained as an office administrator—a job she later also grew to dislike because she was assigned repetitive tasks (data inputting) that, once again, failed to challenge her.

These ethnographic moments echo findings from industrial psychology from as early as the 1930s, when it became clear how mechanized, repetitive factory work can be detrimental both to workers' physical health and their well-being. A senior medical inspector of English factories, J. C. Bridge, for instance, noted how "the pleasure of the craftsman is being crushed by the steady increase in mechanized processes, the result of which is seen in the tendency to rise of sickness rates for 'nervous disabilities'" (Danckert and Eastwood 2020: 32). Decades later, David Graeber's critique of "bullshit jobs" takes on a similar lens to white- and blue-collar work beyond factories. In *Bullshit Jobs* (2018) Graeber, a proponent of universal basic income, argues that many jobs that workers regard as meaningless are psychologically destructive. Despite automatization processes and productivity increases in the last century, the workweek has maintained its length while meaningless bureaucratic and managerial jobs are artificially kept afloat, he argues. Graeber, building on Weber, locates the roots of this trend in the puritanical idealization of the work ethic and in political agendas that seek to preserve jobs. Workers in "bullshit jobs," Graeber argues, are denied a sense of agency through sham employment that "makes clear the degree to which you are entirely under another person's power" (2018: 102). Sinan's inability to sit down while being forced to perform busyness despite having nothing to do seems a particularly apt metaphor for Graeber's argument. To summarize the point with Willis's words from his ethnography of working-class "lads" in 1970s Britain: "We are not dealing with the attraction of work as opposed to the 'boredom' of unemployment. Boredom is what workers do in both places. The difference is that one pays, the other does not" (1977: 264).

There was some continuity in the notion of boredom as a matter of "having nothing to do." Sinan grew up in the neighborhood, in a large

social housing project on the city's outskirts. He still lived there, in a shared apartment with his parents, although he sometimes spent a few days with his brother, "because I'm freer there." When asked about his childhood living in public housing, he shrugged. "There wasn't really much to do. We spent a lot of time in the Admiral [the betting office] and grew up with drugs and fights, especially in the summer when everyone is out in the park. But here [the youth center] is good." Although he now had a full-time job as a security guard, the trope of "having nothing to do" found its way from public housing to the precarious conditions of seasonal work and slow, nonunionized security guard jobs. Sinan, however, complained little, as I noticed during the conversation. He talked about his life and work as a communal experience shared with colleagues accustomed to precarious seasonal work and long periods of doing nothing. So, what might this collective engagement with boredom look like in digital environments transcending the online and offline, both digital alleys and park benches?

Doing Nonsense

While we sat scattered around the youth center sofas and watched a group of young men play mobile games on their smartphones, I turned to Jan, an irregular visitor in his late teens. "Do you and your peers play digital games?" I asked.

"Yeah, we do play sometimes, but not on the computer," Jan replied.

"So, you never get together to play video games?"

"No, I usually meet with my friends, somewhere outside, we go out and do nonsense [*machen Blödsinn*]."

Gaming (playing video games on a computer or console)—an activity considered popular, especially among young men—is not necessarily an alternative to doing nothing. For most, spending a lot of money on gaming equipment is a substantial investment, with a new PlayStation console costing over €500, at an age when few young people are earning their own salaries. And even when they are, the salary may be shared with parents in exchange for rent and housework. For Erkan, the sixteen-year-old construction apprentice, for example, it made sense to share his earnings with his mother. "Sometimes I help around the house, but I don't do laundry. My mother does that. It's a woman's job. And I give her my earnings, so that's fine. And it comes from the heart." In this context, playing mobile games for free is a common alternative to buying gaming equipment.

But occasional mobile games do not prevent young men from going and doing "nonsense" outside. "Nonsense," much like "cruising" and

"looking for something to happen" in Musharbash's work in the Warlpiri Indigenous settlement in Australia, or like seeking excitement to interrupt everyday boredom among working-class British "lads" in Willis's (1977) seminal work, can be a way to negotiate boredom through nondestructive practices. At the same time, destructive episodes, when they occur in a space where little else is happening, can reinforce a sense of pride and accomplishment. When I met Nina, a fifteen-year-old girl with a shy smile and soft hazel eyes, I asked her what she does in her spare time. "We destroy stuff," she said as she and her friend laughed. "Did you see the broken window at the bus stop? That was us. I actually have two incidents on my record," Nina said. Then her friend added with a laugh, "I have three." At first, I assumed this was an introduction for a new "intern," since this was the first time they saw me. After all, I was already used to Mehut, a young man who was notorious for lying about his many adventures, which he regularly invented and narrated to newcomers, to the amusement of his friends, who kept giggling as he told stories of his glorious travels and casino visits. It was only after a while, however, when Nina was involved in a court case for another incident that included violence, that it became clear that "nonsense" and "destroying things" were indeed a way to pass the time. Nina grew up in difficult circumstances and was occasionally beaten by her mother. In the run-up to the court hearing, the youth center staff took a mediating role and talked to the mother to defuse the situation before it could escalate in private. The tense situation at home led Nina to go to the parks or the youth center where she could rebel and hide at the same time, as she did when her mother visited the youth center—by climbing onto the nearby roof to watch the conversation from a safe distance. In contrast, Arnel was more cautious in how he explored boundaries. This included drinking and hanging out in shisha bars without his strict father's knowledge, in addition to weighing up the possible disadvantages of punching his right-wing bullying classmate. But he was less than impressed by his friends' attempts to persuade him to come along to the Admiral betting shop: "They wanted me to bring my passport and pay thirty euros in advance. That's a lot of money, so I didn't do it." Arnel, who carefully planned and negotiated the semiregular purchases of PlayStation games (which cost about fifty or sixty euros each) with his parents, was careful with his limited funds.

Again, doing nothing is both a set of visible practices that are individually and socially negotiated, and a form of absence, of "not having much to do" in Sinan's neighborhood—an ambivalence that is perhaps captured in "doing nonsense." Time can turn into boredom when the sense of agency is restricted or withdrawn, as in the case of prisoners

who "do time" amid lost autonomy. For Canada-based psychologist John Eastwood, the sense of agency is key to understanding boredom. Eastwood, who is a practicing psychotherapist, saw patients who struggled with drugs and depression and described being "chronically bored"—a circumstance Eastwood framed as a sense of "failure to launch into life" (Poole 2020). In their resulting book on boredom, Danckert and Eastwood argue that boredom, as a crisis of agency, can be countered in a variety of ways by reclaiming agency: "Vandalism, cast in this light, is not merely senseless destruction but a response to challenged agency at least sometimes driven by boredom" (2020: 101). The circumstances that caused boredom, however, also cause practices of "killing time" in all its facets, rather than boredom being a cause in itself (Musharbash 2007: 413). The experiences of being excluded from participating in (meaningful) work and consumption, of being confronted with notions of what "foreigners" can and cannot do; of having precarious working conditions or problems at home; where "nonsense," brawls, drugs, and Admiral betting shops provide a legitimate and readily available mode of entertainment—all these emerge along with boredom and are not necessarily caused by it. The notion of doing nonsense, in all its facets, extends to digital practices as well. When I asked Marko about his use of social media, he described the different habits of various friends he follows on Instagram, some of whom tend to be quiet and others who post more frequently:

> I am not this type of person. I do not need to post something every day. Naturally, I check it every day, but I don't post nonsense. Actually, it is all nonsense anyway, but it is our everyday life. You also use it when you are bored. Actually, it is nonsense anyway. It doesn't really have any deep background.

In Marko's account, (digital) nonsense seems to be something you just do, something that is an inescapable part of everyday life, much like doing nonsense in the parks.

Boredom and Smartphones

What role do smartphones play in this kind of "chronic boredom," beyond the temporary boredom of everyday life? In popular discourses, smartphones, especially in the context of social media, are often portrayed as a superficial and unhealthy distraction that do not allow for deep engagement with the world. This view is echoed in the work of Danckert and Eastwood (2020), who frame smartphones and social me-

dia in particular as "engagement machines" that serve as superficial, quick, and easy relief from boredom—machines that, however, lack deep connection and engagement, thus reinforcing the problematic aspects of boredom. Yet, as a closer look at ethnographic data on everyday nonevents can reveal, even practices like scrolling are more than just a sum of superficial content passing by. When hanging out turns into long periods of waiting and boredom, the role of smartphones and social media becomes even more complex, as Erkan's story exemplifies.

Erkan was the confident sixteen-year-old construction apprentice who asked me about my salary and questioned my sanity for watching video game walkthroughs with Lenny. Erkan loved scrolling through Instagram and chatting with "lots" of girls on Snapchat. As he gladly disclosed, "I like to text with lots, sometimes at the same time. I get bored quickly and move on. But maybe that's just because I'm still young." His parents, he added, expected him to marry a Turkish girl at some point: "That's for sure." At that point, however, he was still corresponding with girls for fun. One day at the youth center, Erkan told me that he was skipping work today because he was sick and did not feel like going to work: "Although," he joked, "I would like it if I infected my colleagues, and they all got sick." Erkan hated his colleagues, whom he accused of treating him badly: "I just want to finish this apprenticeship and then 'goodbye, never again, construction site.'" When asked why he chose this apprenticeship if he hated it so much, Erkan gave a familiar answer. "I don't know, actually there was nothing else but construction work or retail, and I didn't want to work in a store." Then he explained further:

> Suzana: "What would you like to do?"
> Erkan: "Something to do with driving."
> Suzana: "And why don't you?"
> Erkan: "How am I supposed to drive, at sixteen?"
> Suzana: "True. But what would you like to drive?"
> Erkan: "I don't know, probably a taxi."
> Suzana: "Don't bus and tram drivers have better contracts and earn more? [Being a tram driver was often mentioned as a dream job, often unattainable.]"
> Erkan: "My father is a taxi driver. You can make more money if you work more."

Erkan had the choice of either doing one of the two available jobs, neither of which interested him, or doing nothing for several years until he turned eighteen and could drive a taxi. He was stuck in this limbo for

more than a year until he decided to apply for a job at the construction site—a job that was easy to find for a change.

> Erkan: "I hung around at home and did nothing. I was on my phone all day. I was waiting for my friends to finish work and hang out with me."
> Suzana: "What were you doing on your phone all day?"
> Erkan: "I don't know. I don't even want to remember. It was so boring, so I started looking for a job."

Erkan, normally a cheerful, confident person, seemed uncomfortable talking about this time of his life. His expression darkened increasingly as he talked about the boring year of waiting until he turned eighteen, and later about the work at the construction site that served a similar purpose. Erkan described not just a single episode of situational boredom but a long period of uncertainty followed by work that reinforced feelings of detachment and frustration. At best, this would be followed by a life as a taxi driver in a country where the average salary of a driver borders on the minimum wage. The preoccupation with the smartphone becomes both a relief from boredom and a reminder of exclusion that reflects boredom back at him by being the only thing he can do to distract himself from boredom—a blur of time best forgotten.

In my interpretation of the conversation with Erkan, there are two sides to the story. On the one hand, Erkan was confronted with endless scrolling and thus the endless feeds of things happening online—where the mundane nonevents in his friends' lives are framed as mementos; a preselected gallery of other people's curated events condensed into an impressive image deemed worth sharing. Each scroll that brings distraction from waiting is also an exhaustive reminder that life happens elsewhere. While Instagram ads bring an endless stream of well-lit merchandise into his room, Erkan is aware that he cannot participate in consumption without choosing a despised job. Thanks to the metadata he provides as he scrolls and moves through the internet, the goods are personalized to his desires. They seem almost within reach, but are not quite. In O'Neill's (2017a) inverted negative, daily practices and routines also indicate what is missing. Scrolling through the plethora of social media feeds can also reinforce the absence of something else.

In contrast, the smartphone is also a place of comfort and a life-affirming social pulse during Erkan's isolation at home. Erkan had two brothers, but he did not spend time with them: "They come home and disappear into their room, and then I get bored and leave in the evening." There were no ritualized meals with his family, and he spent most of his time in parks and malls, at a kebab stand or sometimes at Mc-

Donald's. During the year of unemployment, when he was waiting for his friends to come home, the smartphone was a lifeline. His friends could spend their breaks sending a quick and easy motivating push to a friend through a snap or a like. At the same time, an occasional chat on Snapchat with a girl could make for effortless flirtation. As the philosopher of technology Dylan E. Wittkower argues in his essay on Facebook and boredom, "One of the successes of Facebook is the way in which it allows us to be bored together" (2013: 185). Neither a computer nor a smartphone, nor "active" engagement, will change the reality of youths who are "destined" to become gardeners, construction workers, and taxi drivers. Yet, it is vital to understand the plethora of ways in which smartphones can fill the boring, disengaged moments of everyday life, despite the absences that occur in the process, in order to avoid problematizing "passive" digital practices and ways of being online that are deemed superficial and toxic by default. Such a technology-focused perspective does not account for the reality of long periods of chronic boredom and absence when screens are the only available access to intersecting social spaces. Smartphones and how they provide endless opportunities for effortless distraction and relief from boredom cannot be separated from the context in which they are used.

This is the backdrop against which Erkan's scrolling through Instagram feeds becomes more than just mindless, superficial scrolling through endless content. When everyday life is characterized by waiting, smartphones become another abode, embedded in Erkan's waiting for his career as a taxi driver or in Samuel's sometimes seemingly inescapable cycles of applications. The scrolls disperse boredom for a moment, yet are also a reminder of life happening elsewhere, of being aware of one's limited capacity to consume as one scrolls through enticing ads. The activities of doing nothing also highlight what is not being done, of the goods, apprenticeships, and jobs that are beyond one's reach. In this context, the endless feeds of social media resonate with the endless loops of rejections and the endless feeds of meaningless bureaucratic exercises. They are, however, self-determined, and they can be done in the in-between moments while keeping open the possibility of something happening (see chapter 2). They are not so different from the regular café visits made by unemployed young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who both react to circumstances of institutionalized unpredictability by structuring their day with coffee-infused routines and also reproduce it (Čelebičić 2017). There is no illusion of total escapism in such moments, when one is aware that even work is better than boredom and waiting for employment is boring, nevertheless. Entertainment offers afforded through digital media serve to pass the

time. They do not necessarily distract from the fact that something has derailed and gone out of sync. In one of the discussions during a codesign workshop in a school, I asked students if they felt they were more or less bored after being on their smartphones. The responses reflected the complexity of such practices and the unsuitability (to define it in quantifying terms) of this question. One response stood out: "No. It's not that I'm less bored afterward, but there is less time left in which I'm bored." Being online in such fleeting ways is not necessarily seen as a release from boredom, but perhaps as a kind of "better-than-nothing" pastime, a way of not necessarily defeating time but of "tricking" it, to borrow a term by Roxana Moroşanu and Felix Ringel (2016).

This view complicates Danckert and Eastwood's (2020) framing of smartphones as shallow engagement machines that must reinforce the problematic aspects of boredom, as they promise quick and easy relief from boredom. This promise must inevitably be disappointed if one relies on social media for distraction, whether by scrolling through social media feeds, wasting time with mobile games, or binge-watching series on Netflix (2020: 143). While this particular way of doing nothing appears problematic to them, the authors suggest that running, reading a book, and picking up a guitar are more productive ways of dealing with boredom than distraction (55). It is worth noting how, once again, activities favored by the cosmopolitan, urban middle class emerge as superior and more meaningful when compared with "passive" media consumption. This observation aligns with Wellgraf's (2018) arguments in his school ethnography in Berlin, where he points to this pathologization of students' smartphone practices as distractions bordering on ADHD. Smartphone videos are associated with superficial, trivial, vulgar, and violent content, often at odds with lofty ideals of deep and focused intellectual engagement (2018: 58). In his ethnography, however, Wellgraf shows how the search for entertaining stimuli on social media can interrupt boredom reproduced by schools that some students experience as a profoundly alienating environment. By creating their own videos based on global trends, the students engaged in spontaneous, fun, and playful practices that stood out against the backdrop of the otherwise subdued and disengaged atmosphere in the school. While they are increasing calls across the globe to limit screen time, some children and young people, unlike their less privileged peers, may have alternatives they can use to alleviate occasional boredom and engage in socially acceptable "hobbies" distinct from work, as opposed to chronic unemployment and "doing nonsense." When boredom is viewed solely through a psychological lens, the political aspect introduced by critical philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists is lost—boredom be-

comes an individualized psychological problem that can be treated as a mental health issue (Ros Velasco 2020).

Doing Nothing Together

Back to the youth center. The clock has not quite reached 10 p.m. yet. When it does, the youth center will close its doors. On the sofa next to the door, Robert, a sixteen-year-old boy, is talking to himself, looking at his digital watch and then through the window toward the tram stop visible from the center. In about three minutes, his tram will arrive—he knows the timetables of almost all tram lines in Vienna by heart. Erkan is long gone, along with other workers on the construction sites and in the factories who have an early start. Lenny is still sitting on the bar stool at the old computers, watching the videos. He usually leaves at one minute after ten, but not before going around and hugging all the staff. In the meantime, I have changed several sofas, visited Lenny at the computer, had several teas to keep me occupied and awake during the quieter moments, played a few games of table football with reluctant youths who usually prefer to play with someone who can actually hit the ball instead of just wildly twirling the handles, and been yelled at by Arnel for still not doing well on *Mario Kart Wii* despite his instructions: "Drive more to the right, woman, driveee!" Regardless of our rhythms of activity and quiet, and regardless of our plans for tomorrow, we shared a space where both hanging out and doing nothing were possible in sync, a place where we could also be bored together. We could linger in the space of potentiality and multilateral sociality (see chapter 2) until something happened and the rhythm changed, until there were suddenly fewer glances at the clock, be it on the wall, the digital clock, or the smartphone clock app—until a conversation was initiated, the latest gossip shared, or an analog or digital game drew our attention into a temporary magic circle before it dispersed again. The smartphone, by allowing its users to dwell in this potentiality until something happens, fits into this environment.

Scrolling, swiping, and snapping are not isolated digital practices that revolve around screens. Rather, they come along on walks through the social housing estates and yards, and they join hangouts at the youth center, on park benches, or at the shopping malls. Thanks to the interstitial design that allows the all-encompassing mobile technology to be integrated into everyday life, these practices co-constitute the fabric of everyday nonevents, becoming part of the general chatter and even part of the shared experience of waiting, unemployment, and boring work. They are also used to keep in touch with the environment. Anthropo-

logical studies have long recognized the importance of casual social exchanges ("phatic information"), where small talk, like an occasional greeting, allows one to stay in touch without necessarily exchanging content or information (Malinowski 1922). Structuralists, such as Max Gluckman (1963) and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1940), have described how gossip, scandal, and banter can be essential to social cohesion (Pink 2015: 81), while recent research in digital anthropology has shown how life affirming this can be in a digital context as well (Miller et al. 2021). My field notes are filled with references to gossip, jokes, and memes shared by my interlocutors while scrolling through social media feeds and noticing things worth sharing. At many of these hangouts, funny videos and memes created a moment of temporary, shared intimacy. A sudden laugh that broke the silence often led to smartphones popping up in the space between peers—where heads met over a funny video posted on Instagram. The joyous moment could be dispelled soon after, as everyone involved returned to their own feeds, games, or homework. Memes could be saved to a gallery in an attempt to capture the temporary humorful bit passing by on the ephemeral social media feeds. Arnel, for example, once showed me a gallery of memes he had saved on his smartphone—as a reservoir of jokes and funny pictures to share when he saw fit or when he needed to cheer up. Then, another young visitor used an image of a bare backside he had dug up on the internet to run around, jumping out from behind sofas and showing it to girls, who then looked away in embarrassment and screamed—a scene not much different from throwing a worm at a screaming girl would have been in my childhood prior to smartphones. A quick like or a snap is another form of mutual recognition and affirmation of each other's existence and relationships—a practice of caring, but also a result of the boredom and deliberate playfulness of such a design.

Moreover, smartphones can represent a social pulse and gallery—as a family album, a gallery of friends and memories just a short scroll away. This becomes especially relevant when there is an experience of displacement and migration, where the notion of home dissolves and the portable home becomes a lifeline, a reminder of past times and a connection to absent friends and family (see also Hromadžić and Palmberger 2018), as for instance when Sara showed me the pictures of her friends she left behind in the Turkish refugee camp. In her research among female teenagers in UK shopping malls, Noora Pyyry argues that "actively doing nothing" can be joyful and enjoyable *and* boring and unpleasant at the same time, but it is certainly affective (2016: 1222). And, in the comparative work of Miller et al. (2021), the authors report that constant smartphone notifications are often the subject of complaints

in field sites across the world. Yet, especially for older people and those with limited mobility, the "constant buzz of being in the world" also brings a pleasure that is life affirming. And sometimes the buzz is not necessarily about actively hanging out but about doing nothing in particular and watching the world go by through the window. In Danckert and Eastwood's view (and as a number of sociologists and media scholars have argued since the advent of mass media—see Klapp [1986]), the sheer volume of information leads to us being unable to engage with it in depth. This is not always the goal when scrolling through social media feeds, however. Sometimes it is just about the counting of (digital) sheep and doing nonsense. Sometimes it is about phatic communication, that is, noting someone's existence through a symbolic nod (such as a "like") when nothing else is happening. After all, while unemployed, Erkan spent his time on social media only when his friends were at work, before heading to the youth center and waiting outside its doors at one minute past 6 p.m.

Waithood and Resistance

The livelihoods of adolescents and young adults chronically affected by boredom, waiting, and unemployment have previously been subsumed under the concept of "waithood," particularly in the context of unemployed and underemployed youth in the Middle East and North Africa (Dhillon, Dyer, and Yousef 2009; Mains 2007; Masquelier 2019; Tournadre 2020). The chronic inability to find employment transforms the experience of waiting and coming of age into a state of limbo—of waithood rather than adulthood (Dhillon et al. 2009). This is a kind of prolonged adolescence (Masquelier 2013: 475) with plenty of unstructured time and unease about the future (Mains 2007). Masquelier describes waithood among underemployed youth in Niger as "a period of stagnation characterized by helplessness, dependency and boredom. Unable to educate themselves, find steady jobs, marry, and start families, they are said to spend years in social limbo" (2013: 474–75). Masquelier's interlocutors found themselves "jammed in a place where nothing happens" (481), painfully aware of the alienated temporal position in which the "dead time" of waiting for employment is juxtaposed with the "forward-moving time of modern society" (484). The anthropological construct of waiting resembles the "crisis of agency" that Danckert and Eastwood (2020) see at the core of boredom: as mentioned earlier, a consequence of the failure to launch into life. Although the Austrian welfare state provides a socioeconomic safety net unavailable in many countries

of the so-called Global South, the themes mentioned by authors working in the Global South somewhat resonate with the frustrations of youths like Samuel, that is, people who are stuck in the endless loop of unsuccessful job applications. It also resonates with the frustrations of realizing that the *Ausbildungsgarantie* ("apprenticeship guarantee" ensuring that young people in Austria up to age twenty-five who cannot find a company apprenticeship receive equivalent publicly funded vocational training) essentially guarantees the right to perform "busyness" rather than access real jobs.

Although the concept of waithood is helpful in capturing the structural problems that limit the ability to act and become a person, whatever that might mean in a particular context, such concepts may also deny agency to youths. Might the idea that a lack of employment and meaningful activities *must* lead to boredom not be a trap presupposing that boredom must arise in the absence of productive activity? Is the concept of waithood, then, a result of capitalist pressure when "doing nothing" and idleness are morally charged? Am I also reinforcing the notion of "the marginalized," thereby reproducing the historically problematic link between disadvantaged youth and boredom, and denying agency to my interlocutors? As Ehn and Löfgren (2010) have pointed out, the often-made connection between idleness, boredom, and the inability to participate in socioeconomic activities has frequently led to analyses in the social sciences that rob individuals of agency by placing a strong emphasis on structural inequalities (2010: 17). In his work with low-income activists in South Africa, for example, Jérôme Tournadre (2020) also criticizes the literature on youths in the Global South for often portraying disenfranchised youths as trapped in boredom and paralyzed by insecurity, whereas activism and youths' role within communities are rarely addressed. In his study of underemployed youths and Unemployed People's Movement (UPM) activists in Grahamstown, South Africa, Tournadre shows how young men from townships and informal shelters engage politically in their neighborhoods through more or less subversive actions rather than being "prisoners of waiting," trapped in boredom and caught in the "socioeconomic incapacity to fully enter adulthood" (2020: 318). "The obvious precariousness of these lives," Tournadre argues, "is not systematically synonymous with an absence of projects" (328). Similarly, in his work on low-income and unemployed students in India, Craig Jeffrey (2010) argues that meetings at the tea stalls allowed waiting youths to expand their networks and engage politically. The idle time spent hanging out with peers was also the time of "productive idleness" in which political plans could be contemplated (101). In Jeffrey's view, waiting and, in this case, prolong-

ing study time for lack of suitable jobs, was used strategically to expand political influence and find jobs in the local political landscape through university politics. Waithood is therefore an analytical category that does not exclude a variety of activities and coping strategies in the daily lives of young people.

Much of the recent research on waiting, however, whether in the context of migration, asylum, precarity, or prisons, emphasizes resistance (Greene 2020; Janeja and Bandak [2018] 2020; Jeffrey 2010; Khosravi 2017; Kwon 2015; Tournadre 2020). While waiting is often imposed by others and involves a loss of temporal control—for example, for asylum seekers who are unable to structure their time, move around, or pursue work—it is not a passive state of immobility but one in which agency shapes the modalities of waiting. Inevitably, to highlight agency, politically active actors or visible, often-strategic actions receive most of the limelight. While Jeffrey (2010) introduces students who aspire to a political career, Tournadre (2020) discusses the example of activists in South Africa. In Synnøve Bendixsen and Thomas Hylland Eriksen's ([2018] 2020) report on Palestinian refugees in Oslo, we learn how the rebellion in the camps was organized by individuals resisting the state's efforts to "empty" refugees' time.

Yet, just as the notion of passive youth can be overemphasized, the same can be true for the notion of reclaiming agency. The human geographer Doreen Massey, for instance, questioned the widespread emphasis on "resistance" and "little tactics" in resisting structural inequalities. In the context of urban studies, Massey (2005) argues, the urban structure was often presented in opposition to the street, to everyday life, to the "little people" and their "resistance." As Massey describes: "This central power is understood as removed from the "the everyday" (as opposed to. . . ?), ironically characterized by the street" (47). The street is then imagined as the "margins," consisting of dark passages and backstreets. Poststructuralist critique, according to Massey, takes capitalism as a "kind of forcefield or switchboard that processes meanings" for granted: "the Salvadoran or Guatemalan selling oranges on the freeways of Los Angeles becomes a figure of 'resistance'—someone who has appropriated urban space and used it to his own devices, someone thumbing his nose at the "master planners"). But resistance to what?" Massey asks (47). The "everyday" is not lived in opposition to something abstract, ungrounded, universal, and threatening (185). A similar argument can be made about young people who are expected to feel empowered to "resist" digital corporations in the age of surveillance capitalism and the boredom reinforced by the engagement machines.

Boredom, however, especially the temporary kind of unproductive pastime, is not always a turbulent state that needs stabilizing or relief. It can also be a reaction to boring practices that one must engage in anyway, or it can be a matter of choice. As long as boredom was better than working on a construction site while waiting to become a taxi driver, Erkan sat at home and passed the time with his smartphone. When the tide turned—when he became chronically bored—Erkan went to work at the construction site, despite his initial reluctance. Boredom, according to Martin Demant Frederiksen, for example, "is a question of nothing happening in the sense not only of no events taking place, but of events taking place that are regarded as nothing (Frederiksen and Dalsgård 2014). Or, put differently, boredom is not necessarily a struggle with disrupted intentions or desires, but can equally stand forth as an acceptance of the meaningless" (Frederiksen 2017: 17). In his work with young Georgian nihilists, Frederiksen argues that "doing nothing" and boredom can also be a matter of choice. His argument draws on the work of Deborah Durham, who argued that personal growth among young people in the context of industrialization came to be associated with the notion of societal change. Upon finding one's individuality and agency, the young person "becomes the agent of social change" (Durham 2008: 168). Agency thus becomes an act of liberation, much in the tradition of the Birmingham School and its tendency to emphasize resistance and rebellion among marginalized youth (2008: 165). As Frederiksen concludes, "The problem Durham raises is that this accentuation of (suppressed) agency comes to overshadow instances in which people do not really care what is going on" (2017: 17). Martin Slama (2010) argues along similar lines in his work on Indonesian chat rooms that enabled young middle-class women, in particular, to explore the "agency of the heart." Building on Lyn Parker's (2005) critique of scholars within cultural studies who elevate resistance as the only form of agency, Slama emphasizes that online exploration of agency rarely moved beyond the private setting of chat rooms and has rarely resulted in "powerful counter-discourses" (2010: 327). In my own interactions with youths, I observed the many tactical ways youths engaged with digital media technologies, temporarily going offline when they felt distracted, adapting commercial spaces with ad blockers, questioning gender assumptions, or turning the "passive" binge-watching of series like Naruto into narratives of personal strength and power. Nevertheless, digital spaces emerged primarily as spaces of effortless buzz and sometimes meaningless leisure and political carelessness, rather than spaces of resistance, empowerment, entrepreneurial fantasies, social capital expansion, and political activism. Not always because young people are digitally "illit-

erate" or unable to engage in such practices, but also because doing so would not make much sense in certain circumstances.

Conclusion

Boredom is a fruitful concept for exploring the structural undertones of doing nothing at the margins and of the circumstances that require looking beyond simply hanging out so as to better situate the ephemeral digital practices of doing nothing. The trope of boredom emerged prominently in the data, because it was often identified by some interlocutors as a trigger for "being on the phone." Here, chronic boredom emerges as an analytic category—the kind of boredom associated with the long waits and frustration that is particularly prevalent in the prolonged and difficult search for jobs and apprenticeships. I argue that smartphones do not represent a superficial engagement with the world by default, as is sometimes implied in public discourses, but have a variety of relevant roles in everyday life: They can be a reminder of exclusion from social and commercial participation and a lifeline in a setting where there is little else to do but hang out in parks or shopping malls. Endless social media feeds are emblematic of the draining experience of waiting and uncertainty but also of the hanging out, joking, and gossiping and creating intimacy through occasional nods and acknowledgments. Fleeting smartphone practices make up everyday life, but they are also embedded in the politics of doing nothing that reach way beyond smartphones and into economic and social exclusion leading to periods of chronic waiting, boredom, unemployment, and rejection.

Boredom is not necessarily a cause of the different kinds of (digital) shallowness, idleness, and nonsense. Rather, it arises from the same circumstances of slow time in which smartphones are inevitably embedded. Isolating online practices can obscure how the environment limits hope, belonging, and social mobility. In this environment, online spaces become another "space on the side of the road"—also the title of Kathleen Stewart's (2020) book set in West Virginia, United States. In her ethnographic study, Stewart describes the everyday realities of the marginalized as the "other," on the "other" side of narratives of modernity, capitalism, and progress. On the side of the road, "just settin'" and "just talkin'" is both a legitimate pastime and a signifier of exclusion. Doing nonsense online joins doing nonsense in the parks without young people pretending otherwise. Smartphones are deeply ambiguous because life itself is. They are not an escape into utopia but a companion to both utopias and dystopias—yet another dwelling where inclusion into and

exclusion from social and commercial participation both reside. Young people using smartphones in the context of boredom are not believing the promise of relief from boredom. The young people I encountered were preoccupied with other promises, such as finding work or getting a response from potential employers, even if that would mean rejection. Instead, the silence and waiting were filled with scrolling, videos, and films—not because these media technologies promise anything, but because they are better than nothing, better than silence.

In this chapter, I have explored the social and political circumstances in which digital practices unfold. It is now time to turn to screens—how are they organized, and how precisely do they fit around the mundane, boring moments of everyday life? What is it about infinite scrolling in particular that makes it nestle effortlessly into these humdrum moments of daily routines?

Notes

1. Almost ninety years after the famous study, a team at the University of Vienna, led by the Viennese sociologist Jörg Flecker, revisited Marienthal with a project titled Marienthal Reversed (2020–2023). In contrast to the original study, Flecker's research explored the impact of a pilot project that guaranteed employment to long-term unemployed residents, in collaboration with the local employment agency (Quinz and Flecker 2023).

CHAPTER 4

Scrolling and Swiping

Television was left on, a running tap, from morning till night.
Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932)

Introduction

"Here you can scroll." That was the reply I received when I asked Toni what he usually did on his smartphone. Then he unlocked it and started scrolling through his Instagram feed. Toni, a seventeen-year-old apprentice plumber whose parents had emigrated from Albania, was a regular visitor to the youth center. Although he had many friends there, he often sat on the sofa and scrolled through his feed for extended periods of time. As he showed me his feed, continuing his rhythmic scrolling, Ahmed, his friend, joined him. Ahmed watched him for a while, then unlocked his own phone and began scrolling. While Toni and Ahmed scrolled through the infinite feeds of social media, somewhere in a white-collar office, in a parallel world, a start-up CTO wrote an article for an online marketing magazine. His advice, one among many, is on *How to Take Advantage of Infinite Scrolling* (Houston 2020). Both scenes feel familiar in today's digitalized world, where a monolithic, universalized "smartphone generation" is depicted as rapt "smombies" glued to predatory screens fighting for their attention, seducing and addicting them, and devouring their time. By attending to everyday practices of scrolling, this chapter unsettles the dominant portrayal of a uniform, distracted "smartphone generation."

Scrolling

Why might scrolling—a simple vertical swiping motion of the thumb—warrant anthropological attention? Not despite but precisely because of its apparent triviality, scrolling demonstrates the ambiguity of design and its invisible mechanics. It can also constitute a lens on the less visible, more ambiguous dynamics of increasingly digitalized everyday life. Scrolling thus serves as a starting point for unraveling the commercial dynamics of the intersecting social and playful spaces in which my interlocutors moved. Such an analysis is rich with the larger implications of how trivial aspects of digital designs bring politics to the seemingly monotonous movements of the thumb. To understand the captivating appeal and the "spell" of such dwellings, we first need to unpack them in terms of their commercial agendas and deliberate architectures that intend to guide users through the arcades of leisure and consumption.

Designed Movements

"Here You Can Scroll": Pushing a Friend on Insta

Back to the youth center and to Toni's comment: "Here you can scroll." As my gaze focused on Toni's smartphone and followed the rhythmic movements of his thumb across the screen, a paradox between casual movements and increased sociality "on the other side" emerged. He placed his thumb on the screen, and, in a seemingly automatized movement, the Instagram feed began to flow rapidly before my eyes. Toni's conscious intentionality, however, became visible as soon as he hesitated for a second in his seemingly bored, automatic linear movements, and quickly gave a like, with the scrolling almost still in motion. Then he returned to his previous rhythm and kept scrolling, occasionally integrating another quick like into his exploration. His scrolling speed slowed when something interesting caught his eye, and it sped up when the feed occasionally displayed videos of scarcely dressed girls dancing, with Toni aware of my gaze.

Despite the seemingly bored casualness that accompanies scrolling, the practice itself, along with the content, is not random: neither the content he curated by actively choosing to follow specific people and groups, nor the ads curated by Instagram in accordance with the data collected about him and his "likes". In addition to the dancing girls, his feed consisted of several Albanian groups that mostly shared funny content in Albanian, sometimes related to something identified as particularly "Albanian," such as funny memes about Albanian families. The feed included posts from his friends and, occasionally, Hollywood celeb-

rities. Scrolling provided a quick glimpse into different social groups, current gossip, and effortless social sharing as simple as "pushing a friend on Insta" (chapter 2) while joining a conversation on the side. Through their uneventful design, social media apps allowed Toni to participate almost effortlessly in multiple intersecting dimensions of sociality, with a learned choreography of semiconscious, embodied movement through online spaces. Furthermore, while the apps are inscribed with nudging agendas, this is only meaningful when Toni decides to engage in low-effort scrolling on a dull day after work and finds himself in an appropriate environment. As he joins the flow of scrolling, he controls the rhythm of interruption as he pauses and supports his friends through fleeting likes while continuing to communicate with Ahmed and me. Casual, ambient copresence (Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2005; Hjorth and Richardson 2014) is "a way of maintaining ongoing background awareness of others, and of keeping multiple channels of communication open" (Pink, Horst, et al. 2016: 264) where one need not commit to being here or there.

Scrolling from the Design Point of View

From the perspective of developers and designers, scrolling is a mechanic that denotes a form of movement and navigation through content, allowing users to interact with large amounts of data interruption-free (Jeong, Kim, and In 2018: 1). As a simple vertical movement, scrolling was an integral part of early software and hardware (for instance, through using a computer mouse). Initially, it was just another aspect of the invisible infrastructure that enabled linear movement through space, rather than a popular term now often used by my interlocutors to refer to navigating websites and apps, especially when using Instagram. Like the antecedent metaphor of *surfing* the web, scrolling also represents a symbolic image of movement. However, unlike scrolling, the metaphor *surfing* evokes the notion of freedom, as users seem to move in all directions through hyperlinks. Yet, despite the symbolic association with freedom of movement, even early browsers were designed to allow linear (and culturally specific) "forward and back, in and out, up and down" movement (Richardson 2010: 4). The popularity of smartphones and thus mobile apps changed the design of web movement, primarily by constraining it. Scrolling reflects the constraints of an app: It guides users through content in an even more predictable, linear fashion (compared to browsers), while most content (such as ads or videos) is integrated into the feed itself. Unlike browsing, scrolling has a different emphasis. Instead of multidirectional movements through the browser hyperlinks, scrolling has become associated with applications—

separate areas of the smartphone that each scroll out like a single-sheet parchment roll.

The trend away toward the smartphone meant that the browser was increasingly replaced with insular applications that became little worlds unto themselves. This change did not begin with the introduction of the iPhone; rather, it followed a much longer history of bundling and commercializing software, from punch cards to CD-ROMs, and reflected evolving business models in the software industry (Morris and Murray 2018: 3–4). What did change with the launch of Apple's iPhone in 2007 was the redefinition of apps (originally shorthand for "application," a term in use since the 1980s) into "small and stylish bundles of code" (2018: 3–4). Earlier computers allowed users to experiment with code and customize devices, but these "sanitized" or "sterilized" iterations of software increasingly limited user control (3–4). Moreover, while these developments made it easier for users to quickly access certain functions instead of opening a browser and visiting separate web page addresses or URLs, it also meant narrowing the user movements into a more predefined mold and making it easier for developers to understand and analyze user behavior through data their apps could now directly collect. By moving to apps, Facebook and other social media platforms and mobile game providers could now access users' devices directly, collecting their own data sets on user behavior but also tracking the movements of their fingers as an extension of their attention (Pavan 2020). Because of the vested interest in users moving to applications, platforms such as Facebook have pushed users to use the app instead of the browser by making it difficult to access basic functions (such as private messaging) through a mobile browser (Mediati 2016). In addition, the proper functioning of the app is often linked to the company's request to access the device's microphone, camera, contacts, or pictures, leading to occasional privacy violations (Razaghpanah et al. 2018). Thus, smartphones have led to a collective mass migration from browser-based interfaces to their private mobile spaces, which were designed by individual platforms on their own terms.

The choice of a particular design mechanic is usually based on research into what is most engaging for the user and most ideal from a business perspective, for example, to stimulate purchase activity (see Choi, Kirshner, and Wu 2016). The speed at which the content moves seems to follow intuitive physical laws, and it depends on the speed of the movement. The speed of the upward movement of the thumb seems to correlate with the speed at which the online content passes. While speed in this case is not a physical process in which kinetic energy is actually converted, it mimics physical laws by carefully calculating what the user aims

to achieve in the background (Jeong, Kim, and In 2018). The speed at which Toni scrolls through the images of dancing girls is measured while the software estimates how far down the feed he wants to move. Such calculations make up the essence of "intuitive" technology—a kind of technology that seems natural and intuitive but is precisely calculated. In fact, as STS scholars have argued, the more simple and user-friendly a digital interface is, the more calculations are hidden beneath it. A pair of active noise-canceling headphones, for instance, does not simply physically block noise from coming in but creates that illusion through a digital fabrication that is a "copy of the audible environment in an attempt to negate its phenomenological existence" (Hagood 2018: 279). This intuitive and predictable usability is an explicit factor in the guidelines for designing user interfaces for applications. The philosopher Michael Madary, for instance, has examined Apple and Microsoft's guidelines for app design. He found that one piece of very common advice given to developers and designers is that user interfaces should be "predictable, expected, familiar, fluent, effortless and intuitive" (2022: 9). Madary argues that these guidelines aim not only to improve user satisfaction but also to make users feel "in control." Agency, then, is often only the goal in terms of perception, not in terms of actual user agency (9). Designers and developers are thus advised to create an illusion of agency. After all, too much agency ultimately means an interruption of engagement with the product.

Although my interlocutors most often used "scrolling" as a signifier of being online in general, popular apps like Tinder and Snapchat have popularized horizontal *swiping* left and right, as opposed to scrolling (swiping up and down). Horizontal swiping, commonly used in shopping apps, thanks to research showing that shoppers tend to prefer the items to be displayed in this manner (Choi, Kirshner, and Wu 2016), is a mechanic that the widely used dating app Tinder has also popularized. Potential partners can be swiped left and right, depending on whether the user likes them or not. Thus, the simple mechanics of swiping became a meaningful action of intensified social interaction and "shopping" for potential partners.

In the realm of social media, horizontal swiping has also found its place. Snapchat, an image-based and playful social media app highly popular among young people at the time of my research, featured "stories," which could be swiped through. "Stories" are short videos or pictures that people can post for their followers and decorate with stickers, filters, or text. Yet they were not integrated into the already popular vertical feed. Instead, they were separated and placed at the top of the app interface, where they could be browsed horizontally. The feature was

so popular that Facebook Inc. (which also owns Instagram) mimicked it in its Facebook and Instagram apps after their attempted Snapchat acquisition fell through (Shinal 2017). The movement-leading architecture of these widely used apps shifted again—following users but still constraining them, demonstrating the coproductive relationship and power dynamics between companies and their customers. Users co-construct these online spaces, which in turn inscribes their preferences into the design, as long as they align with corporate goals. This shift is exemplary of the rapidly changing online landscapes and digital interfaces. Such changes are not only guided by general developments, such as the increasing availability of smartphones or overall usability, but are also inspired by commercial activities and data scraping. Just as browsing created a false sense of freedom, despite being equally "inscribed" with values and culturally specific forms of movement, scrolling blended in to become part of the invisible, "intuitive" yet designed infrastructure.

Such shifts are not immune to public criticism—one reason why smartphone models started to measure and display time spent on various apps by default. Design mechanics such as autoplay or scrolling through bottomless social media feeds in particular have been linked to addictive behaviors (Alter 2017). The pull-to-refresh example, mentioned previously, has been criticized for invoking the principle of "variable reward," in which users anticipate an uncertain reward by swiping down with their thumb to update the page, followed by a brief moment of anticipation. Furthermore, the infinite feed can be seen as exploiting the need for closure and thus serves as a never-ending cliffhanger (Alter 2017: 193). In 2018, Facebook responded to this criticism by briefly introducing a label reading *You're all caught up* to its Instagram app. The label appeared once the user, when scrolling through the feed, had seen all the new content posted after their last visit to the app. Instagram's press release stated that this feature addressed users' need for closure and provided reassurance that they had now seen all new content. Although this move came at a time of increased criticism and soon disappeared again, in reality, it had two major problems from the start: First, when someone was following a large number of profiles, the moment of closure could only be reached after a long scrolling session. Ironically, reaching the label *You are all caught up* turned into a potential badge to be collected, thus nudging the user to keep scrolling through the feed until the end (Hristova et al. 2019). Second, the label's introduction also coincided with the introduction and popularity of stories, which now moved horizontally, drawing attention away from vertical scrolling. This change may have allowed Facebook to acknowledge critics while maintaining user engagement—users could move vertically *and* horizontally. In an update to the Instagram app in 2020, Facebook

reintroduced the infinite flow of new content on Instagram. Once the *You're all caught up* mark had been reached, users could now scroll further—this time presented with recommended content from people and groups they do not follow but that might "interest" them, based on data collected by Facebook or Instagram. By the time of writing, all traces of these seemingly reflexive measures have disappeared, while Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat are struggling to keep up with TikTok, a social media platform that specializes in the endless flow of short, entertaining, and interactive videos. While specific platforms, their aesthetics, and the look and feel of the user interface will keep changing or disappearing, the overarching mechanism that gently guides users through an endless stream of content, however it is organized, is likely to remain for the time being.

The endless flow of novel content is certainly appealing, not necessarily because it is infinite but because it allows for effortlessness. Erin, a fourteen-year-old youth center visitor, preferred Instagram because of the buzz of effortless novelty: "Snapchat is boring. Insta is more fun; you can see new things there." With barely any effort, other than moving your thumb, you can "see" endless things while scrolling. Toni and Ahmed did just that while scrolling—participating without effort, neither being here nor there, neither communicating nor not communicating. Both were engaged in hard physical labor during their apprenticeship before coming to hang out at the youth center. They saw each other regularly and spent afternoons and evenings in the same place for several hours. The shared routine continued for hours as they moved around, sat down, communicated, went out for a smoke, sometimes played a game, and then sat back down for a casual scroll through their Instagram feed. Occasionally, they would share a piece of gossip or a funny video. While offline sociality may seem fragmented in terms of explicit verbal communicative practice, this does not mean that sociality is reduced in a quantitative or even qualitative sense. Collective scrolling continues online, while offline communication is kept on the back burner by responding to the content of each other's feeds, until something else comes along. As Yusuf, a seventeen-year-old jobseeker from Azerbaijan, noted when talking about scrolling on his phone, "I do it only as long as I like it. As soon as I get bored with being online, I do something else." Infinite feed scrolling continues to compete with available alternatives, no matter how precise its background calculations.

Effortless Movements

The effortless and endless flow of content should not distract from the fact that going with the flow is political. The opaque mechanisms be-

neath the surface of social media are particularly dark for disadvantaged users, while the better-than-nothing promise is particularly attractive against a backdrop of chronic boredom (see chapter 3). Such design mechanisms are not purely accidental but build on design principles born not only out of the need for user-friendly design but also out of the need to increase time on device—time usually spent scrolling through endless feeds while watching profitable ads roll by.

Adidas Shoes—Interrupting the Flow?

With each scroll through the Instagram feed, Toni not only passed through a social village, soaking up its chatter, gossip, and entertaining bits and memes, but also regularly came across advertisements. At one point Toni encountered a pair of Adidas shoes popping up in his feed. He stopped and swiped through several well-lit images that displayed the shoes from different angles. Known as "native advertising," ads sprinkled on social media platforms usually blend into the feed ("in stream"). They are designed to blend in seamlessly and are therefore indistinguishable at first glance from the posts of one's friends (Campbell and Marks 2015). This marketing strategy was previously used in newspapers or through product placements in movies and series (Manic 2015). However, social media advertisers can now dynamically adjust advertising content depending on the data available for the respective user, whose information has been collected through their online movements. In a traditional browser, this "collection" work is currently done through "cookies"—a trivialized name for a script that stores users' behavioral data and can share it across platforms via the browser. As the popularity of PCs and browsers has declined in recent years, ad-supported online platforms have had to find new ways of sharing data. Users have increasingly entered the insular worlds of single apps, rather than using the same data-sharing browser for all social media platforms. Consequently, Google (as did Apple) introduced an advertising ID that "allows developers and marketers to track activity for advertising purposes. It may be used by advertisers to run remarketing campaigns and record purchasing or downloading conversions" ("Target Mobile Apps with IDFA or AAID" n.d.). This ID enabled user data to be shared across apps—allowing the separate tiny worlds of apps to share information about users globally and instantly. This data exists in addition to the data already collected by Android from the smartphone's location and Wi-Fi services, for instance.

The persuasive quality of ads "going native" lies in their ability to blend in. This is, however, not to say that the youths were unaware of advertising. Indeed, the way online marketing was talked about suggested

a perceptual distinction between the "annoying" ads and the inevitable ones. This distinction influenced the subjective visibility of ads. Online marketing in general was for many a normal, unavoidable, and sometimes annoying aspect of everyday online life, much like billboards have become a common sight in most cityscapes. But the moment they interrupt the flow, users perceive them as a disruption rather than a naturalized part of the environment. Displays become a part of digital environments—and as scholars on infrastructure have prominently noted, infrastructure is often noticed only when it fails and irritates (see Star and Strauss 1999). A brief interaction between Tom, a boy in his early teens, and a youth center staff member exemplifies this. Tom, who had a passion for making YouTube videos but little experience navigating web browsers, sat hunched over the aging computer at the youth center. The screen flickered as he waited impatiently for his game to load. Suddenly, an ad appeared: A young woman in a bikini stretched across the display, jarringly out of place. Tom recoiled, his nose wrinkling in visible distaste. He turned around in his seat to catch the attention of Martin, a cheerful youth center employee standing nearby, who was preparing donated snacks for the visitors at the bar. "What kind of stupid ad is that?" Tom exclaimed, his voice a mixture of disbelief and embarrassment. Without looking up, Martin grinned: "That's the internet, kid," he replied dryly, as if summing up a lifetime of digital annoyance in a single sentence. Tom sighed in irritation, turning back to the computer. His hand hovered over the mouse uncertainly for a moment before he found the tiny *X* symbol and banished the ad with a click. "Advertising is so annoying," he muttered under his breath, glancing back at Martin. Such moments illustrate not just the mechanics of digital literacy but how young people learn to interpret and manage the unpredictable disruptions woven into online experience, often with the tacit guidance (or indifference) of adults around them. While many youths reported that they get "annoyed" when their viewing experience on YouTube is interrupted by ads, this was rarely mentioned in the context of native ads in social media feeds, which do not aggressively interrupt the flow of scrolling. On the contrary, ads are integrated into the overall social experience. By the time of the research, social media platforms like Instagram have perfected native advertising by designing ads to blend in rather than interrupt.

The overwhelming majority of young people I spoke with in youth centers, schools, and workshops felt that online advertising was a necessary trade-off. While most were "annoyed" by it, very few criticized the fact that ads populated their online homes. To most, indeed, it seemed like a fair exchange: The internet is free, but we pay by tolerating adver-

tising. The sense of perceived fairness went so far that some felt guilty for using ad blockers. Ad blockers were developed as browser plug-ins that can be downloaded for free and do not allow ads to "pop up," thus neutralizing marketing content that is clearly recognizable as such. However, some of my interlocutors were reluctant to use it. Gregor, the sixteen-year-old gamer who attended the private school, responded to the question of whether he used ad blockers with a justification: "Well, I know that it's not good if I turn off the ads, because then they don't earn anything. But then I had an ad once and it lasted a whole minute! Then I installed it. Of course, it's all fun and stuff, but they also want to make money." Among his classmates, statements such as "I'm not at a disadvantage because of the ads," "I'd do it the same way," and "Where's the problem?" were common. Sometimes, though rarely, the tide would turn, especially among those who were aware of the extent of the data collected in the background: "I don't like it. I think it's weird that they collect my data every time I play a little game." With the migration of websites to smartphone apps and the resulting separation of different app worlds, a single ad blocker in the browser became useless. At the time, there were no efficient ways to avoid ads within smartphone apps, unless users opt for premium (paid) versions of certain apps like YouTube.

"I Think They Are Dumb"—Personalized Ads

Blending in is not, however, solely based on design—it's also achieved through personalized advertising, which is displayed in line with the expected relevance for the user. The fact that advertising is usually personalized was rather polarizing, but not to a point where it was framed as a problem. Marko, for example, an eighteen-year-old student at the high school where I conducted my participant observation, found personalized advertising "weird," "creepy," and "even a little threatening, stalker-like." He said, "They informed us at school that everything is recorded, where I am, that every day what I'm doing is completely recorded, everything. It's crass. I'm aware of what's going on, but . . ." For some workshop participants, problematizing the issue made little sense: "I don't understand the problem. Advertising is there anyway. I'd rather see men's shoes than tampons. What am I going to do with tampons?"

His peer added, "You get advertising anyway. It doesn't matter if it's personalized or not." The expectation of personalized advertising was so pronounced that failed personalization implied a lack of professionalism. As one of the workshop participants noted, "I think they [Instagram] are dumb. I was in Spain about five months ago, and they still show me Spanish ads." Another student added, "Yeah, it doesn't fit.

They show me motor oil. I never bought that. What am I supposed to do with motor oil?" Advertising can become annoying not only when it interrupts the flow for too long, but also when it is perceived as inappropriate.

When I asked Toni, who had just browsed through images of Adidas shoes, if the ads were personalized for him, he did not seem to understand the term "personalized." I rephrased it, and he replied, "It's automatic," meaning that he had no stake in them, since he did not actively do anything to make them appear. Ahmed, his friend, also nodded and confirmed Toni's views. They were not alone in their acceptance of the inevitable ads that appear seemingly out of nowhere. Rino, a twelve-year-old youth center visitor, was swiping through Instagram stories one day. When he came across ads, he said to me, "They're ads, they're annoying. They always come on. I don't know why." When asked if he thought they were collecting data on him, he did not understand what I meant, but instead said, "I have to look at the ads, but it's annoying." For most, however, the feed was not interrupted by the ads; rather, by default, the feed consisted of personal posts and automated "ads" that were not paid much attention, for instance, in terms of algorithms affecting them. The way ads became an unavoidable part of the online experience is similar to how ad interruptions defined the format of television series and movies. By framing the interruptions, advertising became an integral part of television viewing rituals—as a planned, expected, and perhaps even convenient interruption used for a bathroom break. Among my interlocutors, several youths mentioned that on the very rare occasions when they watched television instead of YouTube or Netflix, they were irritated by the long commercial breaks, a form of advertising that was unfamiliar to those who relied on streaming platforms. It was clear to most that the free social media platforms and mobile games could not exist without advertising, which was thus a fair and "automatic" fact of life, rather than a problematic issue—a view likely shared by many among the generations who grew up with TV advertising, albeit in a different format. Ironically, TV advertising, too, has relied on psychoanalytic theories and demographic data since its inception (Davies 2015). Just like radio, newspapers, and television, social media became a site inextricably linked to advertising and perceived as a natural part of capitalist society by young users who have always known it only in this form.

While Toni, in fact, did not play a conscious, active part in the ads showing up, they were likely calculated based on the data he inadvertently provided. In the background, an army of cookies and advertising IDs was working to "automatically" display ads suitable for Toni. Toni's

Adidas ad was not entirely coincidental; neither was his interest in it. As he admitted himself, he was very much into brands: "The first thing I see about the person is what they are wearing. I will always look at the shoes first." Curious about his fashion analysis of me, an oddly dressed researcher in her early thirties, I asked what he could tell me about my clothes. Struggling to analyze the unfamiliar style of clothing and the lack of obvious branding, he resorted to the next best thing and assigned it to a vaguely familiar urban space he would expect such clothing in, associated with a certain age and a conservative, rather boring style: "I think you bought those shoes at this expensive store on Mariahilfer [a popular shopping street in Vienna]. What was its name again?" The boring shoes I was wearing would have probably attracted little attention from Toni if they were inserted into his feed. They didn't match his style, and they wouldn't have been accepted in his peer group. Adidas would have most likely avoided displaying such an advert to him, whatever "target audience" categories Instagram might have assigned to him.

The ad became relevant not only because it was adjusted to his preferences through collected data, but also because it was discussed and accepted by his peers. Much like a family sitting around the TV in the living rooms of twentieth-century Vienna, the ads were integrated into a context of social chatter and gossip. After swiping through the pictures of the Adidas shoes, Toni used the integrated button underneath the ad to share it with his friend in a private message. He had already had an online conversation about these shoes with a friend: "I wanted to buy these last week, but then I sent it to a friend. She said she had the same ones. So I didn't buy them. I don't want the same clothes as everyone else. Recently I got a sweater and someone else had it. I don't like that." As he went on to discuss the possible purchase with his friend, he sought the approval of like-minded peers—another aspect of the native advertising strategy, which blends the adverts into the social buzz. But in contrast to TV adverts, which had to rely remotely on being watched and were only roughly adjusted to the "target" audience through a few media channels and basic demographic data, Instagram (and, by extension, Adidas) instantly has all this information about Toni's interest and attention, and it will most likely keep repeating the ad. Adidas, along with other online marketers that can afford to contend for attention in the online space, can adjust dynamically. They attempt to blend in, feel natural and automatic, and thus morph into an inevitable and invisible part of the environment. Even the interruption (a temporary suspension) of scrolling was meaningful and integrated into the social setting in contrast to an "annoying" ad on YouTube that serves

no social purpose. The invisible architecture of recorded data, one's assignment to a social and cultural category, and a catalog of suitable and likely attainable goods, along with the pleasurable scrolls through pulsating, effortlessly available social spaces, are inevitably a potent mix. Yet, the data-driven commercial space is neither almighty—as it will not magically change Toni's habitus, nor perfect—as the motor-oil fiasco demonstrated.

Effortless Design

Ideally, such commercial spaces are not only pleasant but also effortless—an essential ingredient in the experience of time lost in "the spell" of scrolling. Here again, we can learn from Natasha Schüll's study of gambling. Schüll follows Bruno Latour's (1992, 1994) view of design as the inscribed script of designers when she examines how the design of slot machines aims to constrain and direct choice (Schüll 2012: 21). Such inscriptions create capitalized "sanctuaries of play" (2012: 43) and spaces of immersion in which infrastructure is designed to remain invisible: "the less aware gamblers are of architectural and atmospheric space the more likely they are to become absorbed in play" (49). Gambling machines are optimized to anticipate desires through behavior management and tracking while erasing interruptions and the sense of time to maximize potential profit. After all, an uninterrupted and intuitive design reduces friction and frustration. The easier it is to "go with the flow," the more likely it is that people will linger in these spaces, generating value for social media platforms—something that designers strive toward in order to create a perfect "user experience." After Nour mentioned that he had watched all seven hundred episodes of the life-changing *Naruto* series multiple times, he added, "It's really easy to watch. They're all twenty minutes long, so they're easy and quick to watch." Enabling ease of participation and erasing effort is a crucial principle in software design (or any design, for that matter), because the designers' goal is generally not to interrupt or irritate the user but to create a seamless experience. In fact, one early precursor to browsing through content was the 1588 invention by Agostino Ramelli, who designed a "bookwheel" that allowed users to quickly jump between several books and pages simply by turning a wheel, without having to move around (Becker 2003). Two centuries later, in 1965, a group of computer engineers led by NASA wrote a paper evaluating various devices for linking hand movements to computers, they chose the prototype that resembled a mouse, because "subjects found that it was satisfying to use and caused little fatigue" (Chatfield 2016). In a world of fast-moving digital markets, it would not make commercial sense to avoid erasing

the potential for traction or user fatigue. But, if value can be extracted from time spent online (and data collected in the process), then there is some interest in creating an effortless flow that goes beyond simple usability. From a designer's perspective, users' navigation of apps needs to be effortless and create a hunger for more, in order to draw the users back (Nielsen and Budiu 2013).

Snapchat has been very successful in building on the idea of effortless design and repeated casual use. Nenad, a student who participated in one of the codesign school workshops, implicitly summarized his preference for effortlessness when I asked him why he did not use Facebook: "It wants too much from me. There's thousands of things you want me to fill out, like what's your favorite animal and stuff like that." Evan, a sixteen-year-old student who participated in the discussion with his peers during the break (from class), agreed with his friends that no one uses Twitter and Facebook nowadays. Then he added, "I only use Facebook because of my family. But it is so cumbersome (*mühsam*)."

"Why is it cumbersome?" I asked.

Evan replied, "It just all takes so long . . ."

Facebook, which originated as an online version of a yearbook (a book filled with portrait photographs of students) at Harvard—the university that Zuckerberg attended—has evolved into a collection of galleries, posts, personal interests, likes, and networks, most of which is visible to all friends by default. It forms a kind of arena, as Ilana Gershon (2014) describes it. Facebook encourages users to share by showing them how many things are still missing. Here, Facebook, like the recruiting platform LinkedIn and several other platforms, mimics the progress bar in video games, a popular gamification principle designed to motivate users to keep going until the progress bar is completed. What seemed to work so far has been dismissed by those used to the effortless engagement on Snapchat, which does not rely on static, ever-expandable profiles. This is a business model also followed by the currently highly popular social media app TikTok. On apps such as Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok, users do not have to do much more than find a username and sign up, without being alerted that they are missing something or have an incomplete profile. Indeed, engagement is not driven by the intent of profile optimization but by other explicitly gamified elements such as "streaks" on Snapchat, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Another classic example of instrumentalizing flow and effort are cookie notices, as mentioned earlier. Refusing to accept cookies often results in the user being redirected to another page where they can opt out—but this detour even further impedes the flow of "surfing" and is not usually desired by the user. Cookie notices and terms and condi-

tions, usually hidden and presented in a dry and long text, cost a lot of time and energy, and disrupt the flow. It is therefore most convenient for the user to simply accept them and minimize the disruption.

Nenad's disinterest in sharing personal information with Facebook specifically was not a privacy concern but rather a matter of convenience. With Snapchat, a profile picture no longer needs to be created separately and then uploaded, but it can be done within seconds of opening the app. Built-in filters allow Snapchat users to get a presentable picture of themselves within seconds and without much effort. The playful filters make the picture interesting and magically wipe the faces clean of irregularities in no time. For example, without having to go through a lengthy makeup session, a user who has just woken up can instantly create an idealized image of themself with rosy cheeks, lipstick, and long eyelashes, without ever getting out of bed. Alternatively, they can add movable cat ears for a quick, often shared, laugh. Even if the pictures do not turn out to be very presentable, the images shared with a friend disappear after a short time, meaning that the stakes are relatively low. Here, the practice of taking a selfie is less an egocentric act than a convenient and playful activity. While Gershon (2011) wrote about the creation of an ideal profile on Facebook that can be optimized from a certain distance as a neoliberal project, Snapchat allows for a much more elusive, fractured self and a more relational, "dividual person" (Strathern 1988) formed in the playful enactment of relationships through ephemeral and playful practices. This is quite a contrast to a self-optimizing project centered around the individual. The casualness of such playful practices is another way of integrating streamlined, effortless social platforms into the flow of everyday life. On the one hand, these practices overlap with the everyday nonevents of perpetual boredom and in-betweenness after a long day of physical labor or unemployment. On the other hand, it is the effortless but commercial dwellings where young people become "digital flâneurs" (boyd 2014: 203), neither here nor there. As danah boyd (2014) highlights, casual, purposeless strolling to see and be seen, to meet friends, and to negotiate status and attention, is nothing particularly groundbreaking.

Strolling Through the Arcades of Socializing, Consumption, and Play

Neither the "flâneurs" nor the architecture based on nudges, commercial agendas, and casual socializing are fundamentally new, despite the new business models and data practices enabled by digitalization. Here again, looking at earlier concepts of hybrid social, commercial, and playful spaces can help us understand these spaces of online flâneuring.

One of these is "strolling" or "flânerie." This concept has been prominently discussed within theories of modernism in relation to urban architectures and lifestyles in the capitalist era. Obviously, it is inextricably linked to the Western schools of thought and ideas of socialization woven into the architecture of contemporary urban and commercialized spaces, and it thus has no common, homogeneous history. Even scholars who focus on strolling in the West disagree about the precise point at which strolling can be historically situated as an emergent urban practice (Werner 2004; Coates 2017).

For Walter Benjamin, the emergence of strolling as a form of consumerist pastime first occurred in Paris in the 1820s, when the textile industry was booming and goods became integrated into the cityscape through covered trading rooms or arcades, a term that derives from the Roman architectural feature of an arch. These spaces, existing not only in Paris, were capitalist at their core, as consumer activity could now be detached from the intention of going somewhere to shop with a specific purpose, and it was freed from weather-related constraints. The covered spaces became embedded in the urban landscape and were brought to life through shopping, socializing, and entertainment activities all at once. After all, arcades were a precursor to later department stores and shopping malls, which now immerse the flâneur in a cacophony of shopping music, appealing sounds, smells, visual impressions, and even more benevolent weather conditions created by heating or air conditioning. For Benjamin, arcades were a hybrid of exterior and interior, architecture and landscape (Benjamin 1997; Erber 2016). The somewhat liminal nature of such in-between spaces also meant that convivial and casual strolling took place in an architecture specifically built on the building blocks of capitalism. The commercial aspects permeated the widespread and culturally specific forms of market strolling, casual gathering, and spending time with neighbors, acquaintances, and friends. In Spanish, for example, the term *paseo* refers to leisurely strolls, social exchanges with neighbors and acquaintances, flirting, and gossiping (Arreola 1992). In Italian, *passeggiata* includes dressing up, walking, and courting in squares (Del Negro 2004). In Banjarese (an Austronesian language) *makan angin* (eating air) relates to relaxing activities like taking a walk or "traveling," an activity that is "like putting something into the soul in the form of everything seen and felt by the environment. Something that makes a feeling of being pleasant and soothing" (Yayuk, Suryatin, and Jamzaroh 2023: 93).

Strolling is interwoven with historical developments, cultural norms, and local notions of acceptable pastimes—along with commercial bazaars and the interests of merchants who "grab" attention and entice

with smells and goods through the tricks of the trade available at that particular moment in history. Yet, these borderline spaces of consumption are also political because they allow the casual stroller to "window shop" and engage with the fantasies of commercial participation. In Pedro Erber's words, "For the peripheral flâneur, the act of strolling cannot be dissociated from a seemingly insatiable desire to participate in the supposedly universal spectacle of capitalist modernity" (2016: 44). In his work, which builds on examples from Brazil and Korea, Erber demonstrates how casual flâneurs from the periphery are excluded from participation while being lured into the fantasy of "be like us, but not too much" (47). Similarly, in the context of her work on the use of Facebook by art students in Tanzania, Paula Uimonen argues how the students used certain aesthetics of the seemingly equal medium to construct an idealized reality similar to that of their peers from Europe and the United States, but these practices could not negate the fact that inequalities still exist in the background: "On Facebook, you cannot see that electricity is regularly cut off in the internet room, you cannot feel the mosquitoes biting, you cannot smell the lingering scent of perspiration, you cannot hear the voices of people chatting while sharing computers" (2013: 134). Nevertheless, the shop window retains its appeal and political symbolism in twenty-first-century urban centers, when broken glass from store windows and looted shelves are repeatedly presented as symbolic images of protests that break down the boundaries of class and capital. In 2011, for example, riots in suburban London attracted worldwide attention, and the media coverage focused on the images of out-of-control youths from poorer urban communities in London breaking the glass by stealing mostly technological consumer goods, thus shattering and taking ownership of the fantasy. The broken glass appeared as a caricature of capitalism and out-of-control youths (de Castella and McClatchey 2011). The alluring, shiny space of the shop windows is inviting but at the same time exclusive. The transparent glass of the shopping windows and displays can be seen as a successor to the arcades, neither outside nor inside.

Similarly, online spaces are a hybrid of online and offline, inside and outside, a liminal realm where consumerist promises and fantasies invite casual scrolling and strolling. Like arcades, smartphone spaces are a mix of simultaneous pleasure, play, and consumption embedded in the act of socializing. While Toni scrolls through his feed, he might as well be strolling the streets, "eating air" with his friends, and occasionally stopping when a store window with Adidas shoes on display catches his eye. Especially when there is little else to pass the time, strolling through the commercial plazas is a source of constant animation and distraction,

with their ever-changing visual and audio themes through from Valentine's Day to Christmas, to the endless streams of different merchandise available to all, at least through the window. Asha, for example, was fourteen and one of the few girls who visited the youth center fairly regularly. She wore a shy smile, changed her hairstyles frequently, and often silently took in what was going on. She was often on her phone, because she had few other girls to interact with in the male-dominated center, and the boys intimidated and sometimes teased her. "What do you usually do after school?" I asked her.

"Most of the time I'm at the shopping malls with my friends," she replied.

"And what do you do there?"

"We walk and look around."

The casual walks lead through the well-lit storefronts of shopping malls, just as they once did through the arcades of Paris.

But, for young people who stroll through shopping malls and ride endless loops on air-conditioned buses to cool down in the summer when youth centers are closed, lingering and strolling in these hybrid spaces seems far removed from the aristocratic, romantic escapes of the privileged male flâneur and spectator of the nineteenth century (Wolff 1985). For instance, British shopping malls, usually associated with young female flâneurs, do not evoke romantic associations, but are often framed negatively as "useless, feminine, and superficial" (Pyyry 2016: 11). Yet, shopping malls are sometimes the only available, clean, safe, and fairly supervised space with a regulated climate. As Noora Pyyry and Sirpa Tani note, "the lure of a mall is not accidental." They are designed to seduce by creating a "cozy, homelike atmosphere" and a "climatized and stabilized environment throughout the year" (2016: 8). Similarly, in their sociological study of teenagers who spent time in a British shopping mall, Matthews et al. found that the "young people maximized the buzz, by hanging out in those parts of the mall where there was continual flux, lots of noise and a rolling stream of people" (2000: 286). They used balconies, elevators, and escalators as meeting places where they "could alternate their attention between members of their own group and lively surroundings" (286). The constant buzz, the flow of people and sounds, and bright lights are also what social media is all about. The endless flow of buzz allows one to linger and stroll in between, socializing and watching it all at once. It was precisely the in-between buzz addressed by the authors that allowed social media apps to fit into the nonevents of everyday life.

Nevertheless, spending time in these spaces, however playful and busy, ultimately cannot erase the realization that young people on the

margins of society remain alienated from accessing the goods on the other side of the window. According to Pyyry, the goods on display in the malls, including trendy iPhones and iPads, can be played with, makeup and clothes tried on, without necessarily wanting or being able to purchase them: "There is thus 'freedom' to play with the artifacts, but this freedom works through neoliberal logics: the aim is to create a desire to consume" (2016: 11). The storefronts that Asha and Toni encountered online are a different kind of urban landscape—one that moves dynamically with the flâneurs, its storefronts adapting as they move. Instead of Toni walking past the store on Mariahilfer Strasse where he imagined my shoes, his walks are based on invisible forces that pull strings around him to make his world fall into place where he is expected to be. With each step, or simply by staying on the spot, he shapes this world itself by providing data. As he walks and "eats air," an army of engineers, designers, and algorithms move with him, co-constructing the space and adjusting the flow of content and goods, with a much faster turnaround than seasonal displays in shopping malls. Moreover, companies like Adidas create a world that may just be within his reach, and which appeals to him, his peer group, and his potential wallet. At the same time, young people from low-income families and the youngest users are more likely to leave traces on their forays because they are more likely to give away data online (Feierabend, Rathgeb, and Reutter 2019). In many business models (from various streaming services to YouTube and to newspaper services), there are now two versions of the online strolls—one, free of charge, involves scrolling through ads, including consent to generously give away data; the other, hidden behind a paywall, is reserved for those who pay to be able to navigate an ad-free world. Here, the wealthier users can buy the privilege of not being sold things in exchange for a pastime.

Flow and Effort

So, where does that leave infinite scrolling as a designed practice that is commercially "taken advantage of," as the marketing professionals imply? The spell surrounding infinite scrolling is not a source of irresistible magic but a kind of space organized by designers and infused with commercial interests and populated and contested by social actors. Still, there is one aspect of scrolling that most of my research participants were critical of—namely, the sense of forgetting time. As one workshop participant described it, "Sometimes you're scrolling through Instagram, and you see a video . . . and then you can't stop, you think you're on Instagram for five minutes, then suddenly half an hour has

passed." One way to frame this sense of lost time without either overemphasizing design or pretending that agency is unaffected by how digital environments are organized is to draw on the concept of flow. In anthropological theory, flow has mostly been treated in the context of phenomenological research, usually in relation to ritual, play, and religious experience (Turner 1974). Flow, as a psychological phenomenon, was prominently introduced by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 1975. Csikszentmihalyi interviewed rock climbers and described how they experienced a focused state in which they were neither overwhelmed by their fear or the difficulty of the terrain, nor underwhelmed by the easy challenges of the terrain. They shared a heightened sense of being in control, being highly attentive, and intrinsically motivated while on the move—a state of mind in which the sense of time is distorted (Csikszentmihalyi 1988). The concept of flow has been applied in various settings and has become an explicit part of game design terminology and training. The consideration of flow in game design aims to motivate the player to stay in the game. Throughout the game levels, difficulty increases in tandem with players' skill. Game designers need to motivate players to stay in the game voluntarily, with enough challenges and without significant interruptions—in other words, the game needs to flow, thereby enabling immersion and continuous play. In this context, designers may nudge players into the right direction, while also veiling their restriction of players' choices. Taking a wrong turn would irritate the players and jeopardize their flow, which is neither in the designer's nor the players' interest (Chen 2007).

In the context of digital technologies, flow has been discussed prominently in relation to the gaming industry (which increasingly relies on digital screens and thus draws on widely used design ideas). In her aforementioned work on Las Vegas casinos, Schüll uses the concept of flow to understand what drives some gamblers to stay on the machines for extended periods of time despite intense physical discomfort. In her research, winning at the machines often appears to be only a secondary goal. Rather, as one of her informants noted, the more pressing goal was to remain in the game: "I don't want to win, I want to continue" (Schüll 2012: 12). Through a series of design decisions detailed in her book *Addiction by Design*, Schüll has shown how designers have built flow into the gaming experience by designing environments that allow players to continue playing indefinitely. In addition to adjusting the casino setting itself (sensory adjustments, position of machines in the room), financial transactions could now be made without the player having to actively intervene. The player's winnings were monitored digitally and could be used to start a new game without the player having to get up

and interrupt the gaming experience to go to the cashier. Nevertheless, Schüll argues that the type of flow experienced here differs from the flow originally described by Csikszentmihalyi. In the context of extreme sports, flow is a self-affirming experience that holds potential through creativity and absolute immersion. However, in the context of casinos, it turns into a depleting and entrapping experience that keeps users in the game and has little in common with the creative flow leading to euphoria. An experience that, for some of Schüll's informants, meant the loss of autonomy (2012: 167).

On social media platforms, flow, in terms of effortless continuation, is not only incorporated into the feeds (of content) and the fluidity of movement as an explicit design goal (Madary 2022) but also plays a role in design mechanisms such as autoplay. Video and music streaming platforms generally rely on autoplay to automatically play the next episode of the series or playlist without the user having to take action. YouTube and the streaming platform Netflix, both of which were widely used by my interlocutors, encourage flow by removing the hassle of actively clicking on the play button and searching for new content while nudging the user to keep watching. In this way, it is easier to continue watching (not having to do anything) than to stop the video (press a button), much like it is usually easier to accept the cookie notice than to search for other options. Autoplay has been associated with facilitating the binge-watching of series in a row (De Feijter, Khan, and van Gisbergen 2016; Markham, Stavrova, and Schlüter 2019). The next episode plays before the user has time to decide, sometimes evoking the image of being stuck in a loop. While most youths were not concerned with "autoplay" per se, binge-watching was often mentioned as a guilty pleasure in lieu of homework—a pleasure that could sometimes circumvent parental control. The decentralized nature of the viewing experience—as opposed to the public location of early televisions in living rooms—made it easy to hide Netflix binge-watching from the parental gaze. Jana, for example, told me that she watched Netflix "all day yesterday." When asked if her parents were interfering, she replied that her parents only see her at the laptop but do not peek behind it, and thus believe she is doing homework. However, this practice cannot simply be reduced to the underlying app and interface design mechanism. By making all episodes of a series available instantly, as opposed to having to wait another day or week, as in the past, or having to negotiate precious screen time with family members, Nour and his friend could watch and rewatch seven hundred episodes of *Naruto*, making it an intensely told story that they resonated with and that, in their words, changed their lives (see chapter 1).

Yet, this type of flow differs from the flow that James Danckert and John D. Eastwood (2020) view as relief from boredom. If boredom is a crisis of agency, they argue, an increased sense of control, as in Csikszentmihalyi's version of flow, alleviates boredom. For the authors, the kind of flow that social media enables (e.g., scrolling or binge-watching series), which they call "going down the rabbit hole of infotainment," does not count (2020: 143). Similarly, in Schüll's view, flow at slot machines can be draining, sometimes representing a loss—rather than an increased sense—of autonomy. On social media, infinite feeds offer users the opportunity to "keep going" rather than win a reward or reach completion. In Susanna Paasonen's words, "These perpetual streams of novelty are entertaining to users in their titillations and escapes from boredom that they promise but which they not necessarily deliver" (2018: 219). However, Paasonen's argument leaves one question unanswered: Does social media, with its flow of unlimited content, actually promise the relief from boredom discussed in chapter 3?

The guarantee of infinite content certainly looks like a promise that social media implicitly make by emphasizing the infinity of new content. The promise of relief from boredom, however, is not the same as staying on social media *because of* or *while* being bored anyway. For Erkan, the long days on the phone certainly did not lead to an experience of euphoria, but neither did they draw him into a rabbit hole of no return. Erkan never had the illusion that being online would alleviate boredom—instead, he did it to pass the time before friends got back from work and, in the long run, before he could do the job he wanted. He was not necessarily looking to be productive or actively waste time. Instead, he was hanging out in a space accessible from his bed. It was a distraction from static time, where leisure is irrelevant because there is nothing to distinguish it from. What made him eventually apply for a job he loathed was the fact that the waiting itself became unbearable, less so the failed promise of social media. Flow, in its essence, cannot be reduced to mechanisms such as autoplay or pull-to-refresh that both serve user convenience and corporate business interests by nudging users to stay longer on such platforms, that is, to keep "playing." The black-and-white idea of agentive "dark patterns" and persuasive design fail to capture the ambiguity surrounding various flow experiences. The concept of effortless flow presented here captures both the effortless pleasure of lingering in such spaces and the fear of being stuck in a loop that cannot alleviate boredom. This ambiguity is visible, for instance, in the English idiom "going with the flow," which paraphrases the idea of going along, of "strolling," while being neither here nor there, in a place where decision-making is temporarily suspended by desire.

Scrolling can be defined in terms of what it aims to do: become part of the invisible infrastructure that enables the dance between the user (as frequent, casual flâneur) and the smartphones. The potency of such practices lies precisely in their apparent but contrived invisibility and effortlessness. The very ease of rapid scrolling that makes it a nonevent is one goal of its designers. As Christine Hine (2015) has argued, the speed of technological innovation normalizes our practices, which quickly become a norm without necessarily being consciously processed. Scrolling is just one isolated example of this, as it has quietly entered our everyday lives along with smartphones and apps, with now over six billion people owning a smartphone. With mobility came the informality of scrolling. Where once users had to sit down, ensure the constant availability of an electric power source, and engage with a computer, the compression of computing power into a small device also meant that casual scrolling through the feed could now be done in between, in the nonevents of waiting and not engaging. Digital media are designed with an eye toward "a new rhythm that fits into people's lives" (Alter 2017: 165). They are created to feel intuitive and natural, and yet they are based on precise calculations allowing the flâneur to stay in the flow and dwell with ease without having to engage in intense communication, creation of spectacular profiles, and the effort of optimizing them. This lightness of effortless, flowy smartphone interfaces and app design is thus, especially in the context of unemployment, entangled with the heaviness of chronic, effortful boredom.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with an attempt to disentangle scrolling as both socially dynamic and based on efficient and "persuasive design" that builds on a long history of understanding ritual, play, and behavior in the marketing, gambling, or game industry. This know-how now comes with real-world data and feedback provided by the speed at which the thumb moves through content. Persuasion, however, only goes so far. Such technology is creatively deployed in ways that also meet the goals of its users, including convenience over subjectively irrelevant privacy concerns. Scrolling through social media feeds, Toni can playfully get a close-up look at Adidas shoes, pass the time, and socialize along the way, but he is also confronted with an endless stream of personalized and almost-available merchandise. The smartphone, or scrolling, is responsible for neither the growth of independent "app-enabled" youths nor fragmented biographies, broken homes, and unemployment. More

than anything, the smartphone is a projection screen for contemporary anxieties that rarely challenge the nudging, persuading, and observant marketing strategies that have already shaped urban spaces and households for well over a century, long before smartphones were even conceivable. Online flâneurs have now joined the old arcades of commerce—arcades that have only become more efficient at following and adapting to flâneurs. Those arcades are not only social and easy to stroll through but also playful by design. In the next chapter, I remain in the realm of screens, dissecting their seemingly trivial yet captivating playfulness.

CHAPTER 5

Playing and Snapping

Someone had indeed had the happy idea of giving me, to distract me on evenings when I seemed abnormally wretched, a magic lantern, which used to be set on top of my lamp while we waited for dinner-time to come; and, after the fashion of the master-builders and glass-painters of gothic days, it substituted for the opaqueness of my walls an impalpable iridescence, supernatural phenomena of many colors, in which legends were depicted as on a shifting and transitory window.

Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913)

Introduction

On any given day at the youth center, you could see tables covered with dice, cards, plastic carrots, animals, or other playful artifacts, hear the plopping sound of the table tennis ball in the background accompanied by bursts of laughter, or feel paper planes breeze past you, whizzing through the air. The youth center was a deeply playful space lined with shelves packed with board games, some of which had peeling corners, bleached by time and inpatient fingers eager to open them and spill their contents across the table. On this particular day, the flying paper planes were the result of an attempt to get young visitors to take part in a citywide survey funded by the city of Vienna. A few answers to the question of what young people appreciate about Vienna had already been collected on the huge pinboard: health services, lots of parks, public transport, and youth centers. Soon, however, the paper that was to be used to write the answers metamorphosed into paper airplanes and inspired a competition to see whose plane could fly the farthest. Such moments were of particular interest to me as the "internet woman"—

those elusive moments in which games and playfulness emerged and spread through space and into the nonevents of everyday life.

Blurring Functionality and Play

While social media platforms sometimes include games in the strict sense of the word, they also use a number of similar mechanisms found in games that now serve to make such apps not only purely functional but also fun to dwell in. Smartphones are brought to life through interactive and colorful app icons, soundscapes, and pulsating sensations that give the impression that the phones are both toys and functional devices. Smartphones, in their current incarnation, have leapfrogged the concept of early cell phones by light years, combining a record player, camera, alarm clock, and so on into a single mobile, lightweight device that has become more of a pastime than a tool. As with hundreds of supermarket products with the same functions and similar formulas, smartphone producers are not left with much to do to make their product more attractive. Rather, they aim to draw and hold the attention of potential buyers by making the device an inevitable part of daily nonevents: present in the moments of inactivity, boredom, and routines. One way to make such spaces enjoyable can be subsumed under the trend of "gamification." Gamification as a term, which emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century, denotes the application of game-related insights into what makes games fun and motivating for the player (including flow, look and feel, challenges, and rewards) into nonplay areas. This know-how primarily includes the commercial areas of marketing and customer retention—for example, as a means of attracting and retaining customers in the context of the attention economy (see Cruz-Cunha 2012; Deterding et al. 2011; Dignan 2011; Radoff 2011). Typical examples are airline and supermarket reward systems that offer rewards such as badges, goodies, and trophies, sometimes associated with specific privileges, in exchange for interaction and loyalty. Gamification explicitly aims to extract the essence of games and apply it to "capture" customers' attention as they stroll through online or offline arcades that further already existing marketing strategies. It is thus of no surprise that gamification is amplified in the digital context, given the new possibilities of creating pockets of playfulness and pleasure through points, challenges, multimodal possibilities, and sensations that might attract passersby in ways that billboards, shop windows, and market criers never could.

This intentional blurring of play and nonplay becomes evident when one tries to define what smartphones actually are.[1] The tiny comput-

ers in our pockets combine a seemingly endless array of functions and represent a personal "control hub" (Miller et al. 2021: 77). Yet, they are obviously more than the accumulation of their functions, or I would not have seen smartphones creep into all areas of the field without always serving a specific function—they were simply there, inhabiting the same (digital) environments as their users, being passed between friends, and occupying fingers and tables. The industry's understanding of what a smartphone is and ideally should be in order to capture the hearts of its users is reflected in the Google-funded study in which the economic anthropologist Thomas Maschio suggests that "mobile device use is characterized by the sense that one is playing with a toy" (2014: 240). For him, smartphone technology allows users to enter an almost magical world of experiences, daydreams, and fantasies. Like Miller et al. (2021), Maschio frames the smartphone as a crafted piece of technology personalized through video, music, and gaming applications. One that allows users to create their own "architecture of happiness" in which a "sense of solace and enjoyment" becomes possible (2014: 240). Unlike Miller et al., however, Maschio's rhetoric of magic underemphasizes a critical perspective on the intimate but deeply commercial product that the smartphone also represents. As mentioned earlier, Android, the world's most widely used mobile operating system, is owned by Google Inc. and thus inevitably plays a role in shaping global smartphone interfaces. Maschio's analysis is no accident, as smartphones are indeed evolving into a gallery of multimodal spaces designed to intensify the playful, magical experience of their use, marrying the functional to the playful. The gamification of the interfaces of smartphones and social media platforms is hardly surprising, as social media platform developers were often trained and socialized in the context of game development (Lampe 2014). Ultimately, lessons from interface design and human-computer interaction (HCI) research are likely to spill over, regardless of the specific purpose of the software in question.

Indeed, this strategy of blurring play and function is also an Achilles' heel in recent surveys of smartphone technology use, which have found that internet use among young people has increasingly shifted from communication and information gathering to games and entertainment such as video and music consumption—a trend that is, again, attributed especially to young users from low-income families (Feierabend et al. 2020). Such simplistic distinctions do not do justice to the complexity of the increasingly fuzzy areas of the internet. If news and information are presented playfully on social media, which category does that fit into? When news is presented in an entertaining manner, is it information or entertainment? If two teenagers send each other mean-

ingless images on Snapchat to collect streaks (a number rising with every consecutive daily exchange between the two users), does that count as entertainment or communication? And what about a quiz hosted by print media and shared on their social media platform? These problems of categorization account for some of the fuzziness of "fake news" debates. Often, such debates are based on the simplistic assumption that only traditional media have a monopoly on objectivity and information online, while everything else is unregulated and out of control. Much of the media posts shared online are from traditional media players, who have turned to online content—content that online content creators (for instance, YouTubers) often summarize, discuss, or react to. At the same time, the focus on entertainment is usually seen as an alarming sign for young people's internet use and ability to find and critically evaluate information online, as argued previously. As I will show in this chapter, such changes may also be a consequence of the advancement of features that aim to gamify digital interfaces and blur the lines between communication, entertainment, and information rather than being the digital literacy issue it is sometimes made out to be. As flâneurs move through online arcades, the online and offline, the playful and the commercial blend into various atmospheres within these digital environments.

Microtransactions and Green Blood

It is safe to say that the majority of online games are commercial endeavors. These spaces are not only constantly changing but sometimes also difficult to comprehend, especially for the youngest users. Rabi, the fifteen-year-old multitalented female gamer I introduced previously in chapter 2, was knowledgeable enough to negotiate the normative spaces she participated in from a meta perspective. For example, when she used translation software while playing with gamers worldwide, she reported being weary of the data privacy implications associated with its use. She made sure that chat data was only stored locally on her computer and only for translation purposes. She also enjoyed playing shooter games but was selective about them. *Fortnite* was, at the time of research, one of the most popular games in her age group in Austria and beyond. Yet, it went too far for her: "It's sad, because *Fortnite* is killing made pretty [töten auf schön gemacht]." Rabi criticized the fact that such games are made free in the basic version, allowing younger players to join by simply registering without parental consent. "Sometimes when I see that someone is really too young, I notify *Fortnite*. Once

there was a kid, eight years old, who was throwing a lot of tantrums while playing the game. I knew his parents, so I told them. They just said, 'Let the kid play,'" she said, clearly frustrated with his parents.

Fortnite is theoretically a free-to-play video game for PCs, consoles, and smartphones. Part of its revenue, besides merchandise, is generated by small purchases spent on in-game perks referred to as microtransactions. Typically, players pay for special features, such as cosmetic add-ons, also known as "skins" that change the player character's appearance but usually have no other purpose. Such microtransactions can be immensely profitable, as it costs hardly anything to design a new skin, while the virtual feature can be sold repeatedly. This business model not only has the commercial advantage of providing free access to a younger audience, thereby significantly expanding the player base, but also generates ongoing revenue beyond the one-off payment (Levy 2014). In late 2019, I had a private conversation with the CEO of a game development company in Singapore. The CEO, whom I met by chance at lunch during a university research visit, explained the current business models within the mobile gaming industry: "When I started in the business, the earnings per player were two dollars, and it was a one-off payment. Then it became twenty, and now you can get up to $20,000 per player out of small purchases in games like *Fortnite*." It mattered little who the players were or whether this had ethical implications for the predominantly underage player base. Rather, the players were framed in terms of the potential monetary value that a single universal player could bring in. This also meant, as he explained, that different markets and "audiences" required different business strategies: "Obviously, players in many Asian countries do not use credit cards or have bank accounts, so we had to find alternative payment options for each country."

The incremental change in business models has not gone unnoticed, especially by savvy gamers like Rabi or older gamers like twenty-two-year-old Marco, both of whom have noticed a shift in the industry. When talking about his gaming habits, Marco, a former youth center visitor, noted that *Fortnite* is pretty much the only game he does not play: "I don't play *Fortnite*. It's a shooter game in an animated style, for kids to buy." Then he added, "or not to buy them. Except, of course, you know—microtransactions." He chuckled.

Although some of the paid features are only aesthetic and not functional, and thus do not increase the chances of winning, they could not fool players like Erol, a thirteen-year-old boy who lent his laptop to his peer living in a foster home (chapter 2). He was quick to reject such features, saying:

> Why should I pay for it? It's just for a jacket or something, just because it looks a certain way. . . . This paying for skins, no disrespect, but that's for the little naive kids who have money and pay for it. That's how they [the companies] make a lot of money. They say it's for people over twelve, but it's really childish. It's not like *Call of Duty* [a mobile game with a higher age limit]. There's no blood. You can shoot, but the guns look childish.

Indeed, the game allowed players to choose the color of blood, likely to distance itself from actual violence—a criticism often associated with shooter games. Young players could now play games with animated characters that shed green blood after being shot. Hammed, whose pocket money was reserved for his hobby of flying model airplanes, also criticized the fact that some paid features in games could contribute to winning: "That would mean I was playing to win, not to have fun, so I don't like that." Hammed occasionally spends around five euros in whatever game he is playing: "But it's not much. Maybe every few months."

Sometimes the reluctance to engage in microtransactions was less a choice than the inability to pay for games at all. As Erol indicated, the amounts are small, but they still have to be paid by "kids who have money." Lenny, for example, enjoyed watching other gamers stream their games on YouTube, in part because he could not afford to pay for some of those games. And so he watched others play. Lenny received no pocket money, except sometimes twenty euros on his birthday—which would not enable him to enter such transactions. Lenny usually researched the games he could play for free and then downloaded them to the computer at the computer club (a local nonprofit social project) he sometimes attended, since he did not have a working computer at home. But those computers were usually old and rarely powerful enough to enable a gaming experience, which left him few options apart from watching others play on YouTube. For Arnel, buying games was a matter of lengthy negotiations; it was a well-planned process: "I only get some pocket money for lunch, so there's really nothing left over. But every few months I can start in advance; and if my parents have money, it can happen. But I can't just want something, and that's it." Sometimes the decision to avoid such practices is also driven by the awareness that one has little control over their appeal. Nour, the *Naruto* fan, enjoyed playing a mobile game called *Dragon Ball*. He preferred to play the game in an offline single-player mode rather than playing it online with friends or strangers. He said, "It's better not to play it online because it's like gambling. And it pushes my buttons, so I try not to do it." Previously, his father gave him money in the form of prepaid cards that Nour spent on games, and he concluded while pointing at

his phone, "I must have spent about €1000. My father didn't know what I spent it on. And actually, I don't like gambling. I tried it once in a betting shop where they had a slot machine, but it wasn't as exciting as this." While advanced and professional players can spend large amounts of money on in-game purchases to improve their odds, microtransactions bring profits precisely because of the large user base, who, even if they have fewer financial resources, transfer small amounts to the companies frequently. Hammed, for example, emphasized that he spends small amounts only occasionally, pointing to the insignificance of such barely noticeable low-threshold transactions.

Rabi, Marco, Erol, Hammed, and Nour were not victims at the mercy of clever design and business models—they weighed their options, formed their opinions, and made their choices. Not everyone, however, had the same insights into business models. When explaining microtransactions to me, Marco also explained them to his friend, who was playing *Fortnite* on his smartphone at the time and apparently had not thought about them before. The barely visible, insignificant payments of microtransactions are camouflaged behind the label "free game." Thus, the deliberate insignificance of the small transactions becomes part of the invisible, commercial infrastructures that disadvantage marginalized players. The small amounts promise a better gaming experience for a few euros in an environment where there are few available alternatives for engaging play—and where one alternative is the Admiral betting shops scattered around the city periphery. In the 2018 JIM study, 8 percent of young gamers aged between twelve and nineteen said they had accidentally purchased or subscribed to an in-game service. This was more common among younger gamers as well as gamers with lower formal educational backgrounds (10 percent) compared to gamers with higher formal education (5 percent) (Feierabend et al. 2019: 61). Nonetheless, from a game developer's perspective, there is nothing particularly groundbreaking about framing customers in terms of their potential monetary value. In the previously cited *The Guardian* article on pull-to-refresh mechanisms, Chris Marcellino, a former Apple engineer, noted, "It is not inherently evil to bring people back to your product, it's capitalism" (Lewis 2017). However cynical, this statement points to an important aspect: digital technologies are deeply embedded in wider economic structures and pre-existing marketing practices. Nevertheless, the siren's call is not inherently inescapable—whether it is because one does not have capital anyway, or thanks to a conscious decision to limit or eliminate microtransactions and "gambling." Yet, if the goal is to reengage customers with products (or with shape-shifting digital toys) through hidden design

practices, younger and disadvantaged gamers seem to be a particularly vulnerable "target group."

Habit Building in Games

The irregular cash flow from "casual" customers is something corporations behind such games often try to solve through optimized game design that not only analyzes customer data and spending behavior but also encourages habit building (e.g., Greer 2016; Levy 2014). Like social media, free games must rely on the frequent in-between time spent online, on players dwelling among ads, and on loyal, regular customers who remain in the flow and are ready to return and pay small amounts of money over extended periods of time. Earlier games such as the PC-based (massive multiplayer online role-playing game) *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) already relied on habit building to build customer loyalty and keep the game relevant through subscriptions. To that end, it made sense to create social bonds among players by allowing them to organize into teams called guilds. In-game guilds—a more or less fixed group of players—were designed to combine design and peer pressure. Newcomers within the guild had to perform tedious tasks for the other team members, thus getting used to doing regular tasks and getting into the habit of playing regularly for the group's sake. These tasks included long walks in the virtual worlds while gathering resources—tasks that are not always fun but are still done in exchange for participating in and belonging to the guild. Amon Rapp (2017), who conducted interviews with *WoW* players, argues that the translation of such intangible nudges into visible (for example: collectible) objects is one of the game's most potent mechanisms. Similarly, Ioana Cărtărescu-Petrică (2015) implies that *WoW*'s long-term success depends on the game's architecture encouraging the formation of lasting memories, identities, and bonds. In her opinion, *WoW*'s later decision to allow spontaneous groups of strangers to form groups temporarily, instead of relying on constant, long-term guilds, was one of the main reasons that led to the corrosion of social cohesion within *WoW*'s player communities and thus to declining player numbers. The emergence of "casual" social media games is symbolic of the shift in the consumption of games. They required occasional in-between usage as opposed to long gaming sessions in which one could complete missions in guilds. While early video (PC and console) games were mostly consumed by masculine, young, relatively closed communities, social media games attracted unconventional audiences. The new users were now also middle aged and female (Götz 2019; Kinder-Kurlanda and Willson 2016). Mobile games now rely on

business models that induce habits and draw audiences who have little to do with the stereotypical image of a lone gamer in his parents' basement.

Rewarding players when they return to the game is another way of instilling habits. Even before the advent of casual games, gaming devices like Tamagotchi employed a clever strategy of emotional blackmail. The simple Japanese toy represented a virtual home for a digital creature that needed to be fed regularly to survive. Its virtual life depended on the player's return. Smartphone apps like the gamified language learning app Duolingo not only send frequent reminders but do so in a way that aims to build an affective relationship with what is essentially a boring newsletter. Duolingo sends regular emails and notifications featuring a talking owl. Like Tamagotchi, the Duolingo owl responds emotionally to the player's behavior—it is happy when the players or learners return and very sad when they do not, thus attempting to induce guilt. The app, which relies on advertising, also rewards return, as more features can be unlocked after a series of daily visits (a streak) to the app. *Fortnite*, one of the most popular games among younger age groups outside the China-dominated market at the time of research, also openly encourages its young players to play more and to make their inactive friends return to the game and earn rewards for doing so ("'Reaktiviere einen Freund'-Beta" 2020). The regular reminders themselves are a continuation of older marketing strategies, such as sending catalogs, flyers, and newsletters to retain customers. However, once again, the amount of behavioral data that goes into customizing game design with the goal of rewarding return (Greer 2016) is hardly comparable to the crude demographic data on which older marketing strategies operated.

One obvious strategy to induce habits and regular microtransactions is embedded into game design through the constant introduction of novelties, such as new characters and "skins" that are sometimes announced in the newsfeed and enveloped in mystery before their release, as one young player and avid reader of the game's newsfeed described. He spoke excitedly about the new skins coming to *Brawl Stars*, a mobile multiplayer online battle arena game he enjoyed playing with his classmates and father, while showing me the skins he had already purchased. The collection of outfits was reminiscent of earlier stickers that could be collected while shopping at the supermarket and sorted into albums. But unlike earlier, static albums of, say, football players, his collection of skins was dynamic—the colorful figures moved and jumped around on the spot as he swiped through them. The missing skins were represented by a question mark, indicating that his collection was not complete (and probably never would be). Here, flow, in the sense of staying

in the game, is encouraged by new content. Similar to the never-ending flow of content on social media platforms, games that rely on constant microtransactions must offer new features and new rewards, even if they are irrelevant to the actual gameplay. Such new rewards can be found in unusual places. One day at private school, I saw Marko playing the mobile game *Soccer Kick*, a football simulation. While he showed me the game, I noticed that he had paused the game and watched an advertisement. When I asked him about it, Marko explained that the points he had earned so far would be increased in exchange for watching the advertisement—an advertisement for another game. He patiently watched the ad without complaining, exchanging his online time and attention for a virtual currency with a symbolic value. Ironically, the work of enduring ads leaves the player with the feeling of having accomplished something and thus earning points. Thus, "annoying," interrupting advertisements become an integral part of the gameplay—once again integrated into the game's flow rather than detrimental to it, as a form of acceptable interruption exchanged for virtual tokens.

Despite the habit-forming game design, rapidly changing game preferences and mass migrations from one game to another are strong indications that the seemingly addictive appeal of habit-forming efforts is limited. After all, as was true with *WoW* and other games before and since, when players leave the field, so do their peers. In my observations, playing a mobile game was, in most cases, a highly social activity (at least in the social environment of schools and youth centers). An outsider entering the youth center would often see a scene of several, mostly male, youths sitting around on sofas, heads bent toward their phones, barely communicating with each other. Mostly, however, they were playing together, engaging in intense teamwork to solve complex challenges that required concentration; sometimes they were playing with their fathers or for a youth center staff member. Or, like some private school students, they were bored with homework and had nothing else to do in class. One exception was Gregor, a fifteen-year-old who loved to listen to music on his smartphone and snooze, his head leaning heavily on the desk. As I was soon to find out, Gregor was an avid gamer, spending five to six hours a day playing video games at home and even more on weekends. As he admitted, the excessive gaming that structured his day also meant that he sometimes had only a few hours of sleep: "Yes, I get tired at school," he said. "But I get used to it. It is worst at the beginning of the school year, but then I get used to it." Gregor despised social media because he did not like the idea of exposing himself and uploading his pictures online. He devoted all his time to gaming, something he enjoyed doing with his friend who had similar gaming habits. Gregor was

very aware of the consequences of extreme gaming on his sleep, daily habits, life in general, and the outside perception of it. On another day at school, his classmate told me, "He doesn't sleep at all. He doesn't do anything but gaming. That's one sick motherfucker." Another added, turning to Gregor, "Man, that's not good what you're doing. That's like an addiction. That's not normal." As they continued to discuss it, I asked Gregor what he thought about it himself. He said, shrugging, "Yeah, I would say it's an addiction, definitely." As long as his grades were good enough for his parents to keep buying him games (so he could stay in the "flow"), he explained, it did not bother him much, despite his own acceptance of the addiction label. His peers' remarks about what constitutes "normal" digital media use serve as a reminder that norms are actively negotiated among peers, much like the real-time choreographies surrounding social smartphone use (see chapter 2).

As we saw in the previous chapters, there is another essential component to habits—not only the psychological vulnerability or brilliant design but also the social context in which games are embedded. On one of my visits to the youth center, Marco came in with a friend I did not know yet and introduced me as the internet woman. Together with the staff, they wanted to organize a game day at the youth center, where they would act as volunteers and set up Nintendo-sponsored equipment for the young visitors. After a lengthy discussion about their plans to exclude shooter games and manage young visitors who play "too much," I asked them about their motivation for organizing such an event. The conversation quickly stalled as they initially avoided the question. Then Marco turned to me: "You've seen through us. We have nothing to do. We're unemployed." They then went on to explain that they had completed their apprenticeship as merchants but had been unable to find work for over a year, which frustrated them. Marco even lost his flat and had to move back in with his grandmother. The conversation continued along the now-familiar trajectory:

> Suzana: Do you usually receive replies to your applications?
> Marco: No, I usually don't. They couldn't care less . . .
> Friend: I was luckier, and sometimes I at least received a rejection.
> Suzana: And did you get the interview?
> Friend: Yes, recently, but they did not come back to me. Maybe I will retrain, there just aren't any jobs here . . .

When asked about their gaming habits, they both admitted that they spend a lot of time playing games, but they avoided my questions about the length, as they were visibly uncomfortable giving the number of

hours. Instead they said, "It's hard to say, sometimes a long time at once, sometimes less."

Again, it is hardly surprising that young people struggling with persistent unemployment and rejection spend their time playing games with peers. Games not only offer a sense of joy, achievement, and distraction but are also used by Marco and his friend to volunteer at the youth center and break out of potentially negative thought spirals. Seemingly ashamed of the time they spent playing games, both would probably have been categorized as having highly problematic internet use habits in various surveys that measure gaming time. This says little, though, about why this is the case, or about the initiative they took through gaming, and about their sense of belonging and connectedness to the youth center, even after they had become too "old" to visit it frequently.

Snapchat and Routines

"Even My Dog Looks Good on Snapchat": Chat or Play?

The years of lessons learned in the area of digital gaming have since overflowed into the field of social media and casual gaming: playful, social, and commercial spaces to dwell in—preferably regularly. Snapchat has been a masterful example of this. As its name implies, the Snapchat app combines photography ("snapping") and chatting, thus placing the simple sharing of images or snaps at its core. The app's design encourages image-based communication between users while adding a playful touch. When the app is launched, the camera also opens, by default, in selfie mode—a feature that suggests a particular mode of use for the app (Schreiber 2017). Users can instantly activate a variety of ever-changing playful filters and sponsored lenses that embellish their selfies with fun features like bunny ears or mustaches. These filters and lenses not only add playful elements but also conveniently erase wrinkles and skin imperfections and apply a layer of flattering, highly customized makeup within a second if desired. As one of the youth center staff members dryly noted while talking to a girl about her Snapchat pictures, "Even my dog looks good on Snapchat." The app makes it possible to quickly and effortlessly share perfect pictures or random snippets from everyday life. This playful interaction is at the core of Snapchat's business model and has made it one of the most popular social media apps among young people in Austria and beyond at the time of research (Saferinternet 2019). Photography, especially with affordable mobile phone cameras, has always been a key aspect of Snapchat's popularity. Across the world, people rely on vernacular photographs as objects of memory, family albums, or a "carefully staged performance

of an ideal version of the self . . . deeply entrenched in local forms of visual representation" (Uimonen 2016: 25). Yet, experiments with altering images—which were not uncommon practice in early photography over a century ago—are becoming increasingly diverse, not only with complex software such as Photoshop or the enormous possibilities of artificial intelligence, but also with a simple touch of a button on playful social media apps such as Snapchat. The practice of capturing, altering, and sharing images has become profoundly playful—not only through playful interfaces but also through habit formation.

One of the most prevalent examples of the habit-building principles that enjoyed great popularity among school-age children and young adults at the time of the research were Snapchat streaks. Snapchat's unique selling point was not the basic function of simple social interaction through chats or sharing pictures—all of which existed before—but the casual, effortless playfulness incorporated in the communication streams. Communication through easily made funny pictures is thus decoupled from its purpose—be it serious conversation or small talk. Instead, communicating becomes a playful practice for the sake of play. While snaps (pictures) can be shared in public "stories"—embellished images or short videos that disappear after viewing—the app relies primarily on private chats as its driving force. Yet, while chatting is covered by other simpler, more widely used apps like WhatsApp, Snapchat offers more playful features. For instance, fun images are easy to create and share. Also, actual games are integrated into the chat, making chatting itself a playful affair. One day, Tanja, a private school student, showed me her chats during one of the self-study classes. In between doing homework, walking around, and visiting other classrooms, she also quickly went in and out of Snapchat to either read messages sent to her, chat, or place a move in a game within a private chat. Switching quickly between different games and chats, she showed me several games she played simultaneously with different people in private chats. Such games were often variations on old, simple, and familiar classics, sometimes with the addition of the Snapchat picture-taking functionality. One was a sketching game where Tanja could draw a picture, and her friend could continue drawing while she saw the result live on her screen. She could respond by, for example, sharing a snap of her face that showed a particular emotion. Her grimace was displayed to her friend and integrated into the game screen, making her emotions an integral part of the game. She chatted with her friend while also communicating with her classmates, explaining the app to me, and sketching shapes in the game. In this context, the camera, chat, and game were all integrated into her experience with Snapchat, making it difficult to distinguish between

communication and entertainment. This difficulty also relates to the category of news, as the stories in the public space of the Snapchat "discover" area could just as easily be posted from media outlets or stories of people reacting to these. The playful interface is designed to incorporate these categories into a coherent "user experience."

Streaks: One Snap a Day

Beyond the obvious appeal of such playful forms of communication, the platform aimed to encourage habit formation and customer loyalty by gamifying and rewarding regular chats. Snapchat tagged personal chats with emoji that represent the quality of a particular relationship. The quality of the relationship depended on the frequency of exchanges via the chat and was also visible in the number of "streaks." The streaks represented a number of consecutive days in which two users have written at least one message (usually a snap or short video) to each other per day. The routine was reinforced by peer pressure, as success (equivalent to the number of streaks collected) was only possible if both parties participated by sending a message each day. Such gamification practices are a popular strategy used to increase the attractiveness of a task by introducing an element of collecting and competition, at least in gamification-inspired theory. For the creators of Snapchat, such a "cheap" mechanic is a goldmine. The number of points to be collected, or in this case streaks, was infinite and cost no more than the one-off costs of programming and server space—the points were not collected to be exchanged for any reward and have only symbolic value. The streaks are a number that continues to grow as the Snapchat version of a Tamagotchi is "fed" regularly. Collecting them is an end in itself. Nevertheless, they can also have immense emotional value. Frustration could arise when the number of streaks goes down to zero, even though the reward is purely symbolic and nothing substantial can be gained or lost. The spell is broken, and the pair has to start all over again. The larger the number becomes—the longer the two parties have managed to exchange at least one message per day—the more they have to lose by resetting the streak. Regular chatting thus becomes a watered-down game, tied to peers' social urges and expectations (Hristova et al. 2022). What began as chat becomes a game with no end and no goal, except to stay in flow—thus, to stay in the game. This was exacerbated by a certain time pressure, another element of gamification, represented by a Snapchat hourglass symbol. The symbol appeared when the streak was about to be lost and represented the remaining time running out.

The importance of streaks, despite their purely symbolic value, can be great for some individuals. One of the youth center staff members

told me that he observed a girl who broke up with her boyfriend under dire circumstances, but she still continued to chat with him through messages devoid of content, just to maintain the high number of streaks. Most of those who regularly collected streaks could also name the highest score they currently had with someone. They frequently mentioned frustration associated with losing streaks and having to start over, or not reaching an intermediate goal they had set for themselves (e.g., a round number of streaks). For example, Anita recalled how she had to change her phone and lost her streaks as a result:

> It was annoying, but it's not the end of the world. But one time I had seventy-two [streaks] with a friend, and we lost them, and she was really upset because we had almost reached one hundred. But I'm going to live another seventy-two days, so we can do it again. It's just numbers.

The idea of not depending on technology was part of the discourse most of the time when I asked about Snapchat's practices in the field. Often, interlocutors distanced themselves from the emotional attachment to the streaks by referencing age and gender. Taking it seriously was often attributed to "when I was younger," or it was gendered by male users linking the lack of emotional control over their reactions after losing a streak primarily with girls and their "drama." Snapchat provided a social, popular space frequented by peers and, as some of the youths pointed out, thankfully "not yet by adults." But its appeal was certainly not limited to merely playing with gamified features in a social vacuum. The simple principle of "just numbers" feeds deftly into existing social dynamics and friendship negotiations. As Tanja added, streaks are only relevant to her when there is an offline relationship or a reason for it: "I only have streaks with my really good friends. I chat with them on WhatsApp anyway. If I send a good morning snap, it costs me about ten seconds a day." She primarily snaps with friends she does not see every day, finding it a low-effort way to stay in touch without having to exchange content. For many of Tanja's peers, snaps have become part of their daily routine, which also helps reduce the effort required to maintain them. In Tanja's case, the calculated time investment of just a few seconds becomes a rewarding act of play, caring, reciprocity, and casual contact.

Sending "Something": Snapchat Rituals

Tanja is not the only one whose Snapchat practices are integrated into regular routines that save time and effort, including "good morning snaps." As Tanja suggested, getting in and out of social arenas quickly in the morning helps reinstate sociability with little effort, all within a

few seconds—because Snapchat allows users to send the same picture to multiple recipients. Hammed, for example, emphasized that he, too, put in little effort. When I asked him if he puts much thought into the content he sends, he replied, "No, I wake up, take a good morning snap or something, and then it is off." When I asked what he usually sends, he replied, "I don't know, something, the floor, the wall, a picture on the wall." It was possible to engage in the regular rituals of sending snaps and participating in social exchange, even if a person was reluctant to do so. For example, Arnel emphasized that he does not do it often, because "it's unnecessary. Right now I have fifty, but I've also had over a hundred. Sometimes I stop at ninety-nine because I don't have internet, and people get upset about it, but it's really unnecessary. I have a lot to do. I can't do it every morning and every night." Arnel also mostly sent pictures of himself, a shoulder, a wall, a room, or "something." Besides being a fixture at a specific time of day, the little everyday rituals of sending snaps and collecting streaks via social circles were also integrated into the mundane moments of in-between: while being bored or disengaged. Arnel, for example, also mentioned that he uses Snapchat when he is bored. Rather than just representing a response to social pressure, or a genuine interest in someone's day, quick snaps were a playful practice easy to do in those moments of boredom and quick scrolling sessions without much effort, obvious intent, or reward. One day at the youth center, Cem and Armin were sitting on the sofa, explaining Snapchat to me. At some point, Cem took Armin's phone while Armin was distracted, and he launched his Snapchat app (in selfie mode by default), took a picture of his shoulder, and sent a mass snap to several private chats in Armin's Snapchat profile—all in less than half a minute. Then he launched the app on his phone, took a picture of the floor, and repeated the same thing. None of this was a planned relationship-management practice, but rather a habitual choreography of quick movements bordering between socializing, boredom, and play. Strategies such as sending "mass snaps" to multiple people at once or sending "black snaps" (black images with no content) help reduce the effort and time needed to maintain streaks, and the snaps exchanged are often perceived as uncreative, gamified tokens rather than meaningful messages (Hristova et al. 2022). When the game turns too casual and impersonal, it can go awry. Sometimes, mass snaps are even perceived as detrimental to intimacy and sociality, because they communicate that the person who sent them did not take the time to write a personal message but instead sent a mass snap (Hristova et al. 2022).

In contrast to the metanarratives of a "selfie generation," the goal of this watered-down social media "game" has little to do with self-branding

but is a profoundly relational practice. It is embedded in preexisting social dynamics that co-construct implicit rules of the game alongside the official ones. While Snapchat allows for the taking (and sharing) of selfies and invites users to do so (because it activates a front-facing camera as its default screen), the selfie was not prevalent in the snaps sent by youths in the field. Instead, as Arnel described, the content could be meaningless—a picture of anything seen in one's environment, taken not necessarily because the user saw something special and wanted to share it, but because the content—whatever it is—is needed to play along. Here, one could argue that social capital is extended through interactions rather than self-expression. But, as discussed earlier, framing practices in terms of relationship management and capital acquisition do not do justice to the moments of boredom and daydreaming when young people send mass snaps simply because the smartphone is there and the thumb has nothing to do. The core of Snapchat's architecture of playful dwellings does not lie in the need for a permanent gallery or publicly accessible profile (which, admittedly, does not mean that such a profile is not constructed in the background to personalize advertising and "sell" audiences), but in the invitation to dwell in each other's presence—with advertising present on the side. Like microtransactions, the tiny exchanges and social transactions generate value in the long term but are barely noticeable to users as a short-term investment of time. TikTok, which exploded in popularity in Austria after my fieldwork, works on the same premise—short videos, literally called "shorts," promise a brief interaction of a few seconds. But these few seconds often add up to a not-so-short investment of time.

This form of simplified communication (e.g., random texts or good morning and good night rituals), which can be interpreted as acts of reciprocity, is strongly reminiscent of Tomoyuki Okada's (2005) interviews with young people in Tokyo in 1996. Okada interviewed young people who used pagers to send simple messages using numerical codes, which were then decoded as good morning or good night messages, for example, and could mean "whatever, anything" (2005: 51–52). Similar strategies would later be developed by young people with different available technologies to make the most of the technical possibilities available to them. For young people in Jamaica, these were short calls known as "link-up," which were not used to communicate information but to maintain relationships and networks (Horst and Miller 2005). In my own early use of mobile phones in the '00s, I and my peers in Bosnia and Herzegovina saved valuable credit by avoiding text messages and only letting the phone ring once or twice without the person picking up, either to convey simple messages (I have arrived) or to let someone

know that the person calling was thinking of them, a practice known in Bosnian as *trznuti* (literally "to shake up"). This concept also exists in many other languages: *anklingen* in German, *toque* in Spanish, *tizntuk* in Hebrew, *flashing* in Ghana, *pranking* in Australia or *one-belling* in England. All these practices are less about letting someone know what "I think" and more about letting someone know "I exist" (Grindstaff 2012: 31).

In contrast to the assumption that the majority of social media platforms operate on superficial images and selfies, playful practices that did not involve selfies were very present among my interlocutors. But even selfies were not judged solely in aesthetic terms. Nino's description of contacting girls via Snapchat and Instagram illustrates how seemingly superficial images can also be seen as a source of implicit information about potential partners:

> You can find out more from how she posts . . . find out more about her character. Which pictures, how she presents herself, what she posts in her stories, and of course the number of posts, whether it's more or less, whether she wants attention. You can judge what makes a person tick.

Using filters to improve one's image rarely fools anyone, especially among peers who meet in analog environments. Marko, when asked about filters on social media, dismissed them as "not his thing." He continued, "There are some people who suddenly look so good and in reality they look like a corpse. I don't do that."

"But you know it's not real?"

"Of course."

As we talked about the pressure his sister was under to use filters, he remarked that it depends on your upbringing whether you want to imitate others: "If one fool jumps out of the window, not everyone will follow. She has her own character, her own opinion." At the same time, the reports by Nino and Marko also point to the double standards with which the appearance and presentation of women in the public sphere are scrutinized. Public discourses are brimming with concerns about the self-beautification of girls and women on social media platforms, along with the usual efforts to link social media to mental health issues. What is often overlooked, however, is the long history of this problem. The artistic representations of women on the European continent over the last two thousand years, the existence of photo editing since the invention of photography, countless magazines, television programs, and huge billboards selling the appeal of idealized and scantily clad female bodies have contributed to the sexualization of the female body image

and continue to do so, with or without social media. Isolating and regulating social media as the sole culprit, however, seems less tedious than addressing notions of gender and sexuality in general as a society—in school, in the media, or in politics. To reduce such habitual but playful practices to "self-managing" or even narcissism would miss both the intentionality of design and the playfulness of everyday moments, in which something ordinary might be transformed into something extraordinary, be it through a diluted social media game or by taking a photograph and exchanging it for a reward.

A Toy? Privacy Gamified

The smartphone is more than just a collection of playful dwellings designed for leisure; it remains a functional object. Yet, even these features can become playful and gamified, to the point where their primary goal of helping the user complete a task can become secondary from the user's perspective. Aside from making the smartphone overall a "fun place to be" and increasing the overall usability and simplicity of plug-and-play use, such developments are also linked to steering the user or player into a situation where giving away data, an important digital currency, is the easiest choice (e.g., cookie notices). WhatsApp, for example, requires access to all personal phone contacts in order to display the names of individual chat partners on WhatsApp. For this reason, Meta Platforms (which owns both Instagram and WhatsApp) has access to the phone numbers of people who have not downloaded the app or accepted its terms and conditions. And giving away privacy is not necessarily just easier; it is often more fun.

Google Maps, a GPS-based navigation app, is one example of the ubiquitous and—perhaps for that very reason—almost-invisible applications found in most smartphones outside the Chinese market. The app has evolved into a popular navigation tool and an urban pocket compass. Over time, Google Maps began to include various features in addition to navigation, such as information about opening hours, available gas stations, and reviews of restaurants and points of interest in the area. It also introduced the less visible feature of location tracking, using the Google Maps Timeline. This feature tacitly became the default setting as users were not explicitly asked if they agreed to their movements being tracked and stored by the Google Maps app—although it could be disabled after a detailed search through the settings. The feature allowed users to go back in time and see their movement history: which restaurant they visited years or months ago, how long they stayed

there, and what mode of transportation they used (based on movement speed recorded by Google). In one of our codesign school workshops, we decided to conduct an exercise on the topic of tracking with students aged thirteen to sixteen. Since most of the students were unaware of this feature, we invited them to explore their Google-recorded movement patterns, expecting surprised reactions about the extent of Google's detailed tracking, all neatly stored in their accounts. Instead, we encountered excitement about the interactive features that allowed users to browse through their history. The time bar could be moved back and forth playfully, and trajectories moved dynamically across a map depending on the time selected. Instead of privacy concerns, we found ourselves amid students excitedly showing each other where they had traveled in the past. One boy loudly pointed out the town in Bosnia and Herzegovina where his grandparents lived, which he had visited last summer. His classmate, on the other hand, looked sadly at his screen. There were no trajectories on his Google profile. Instead of being relieved, he seemed disappointed to be left out, to be the only one without a fun map to play around with and show his friends. Google's ownership of their data was of little concern to them, while the inability to participate in the unintentional, spontaneous game of Google's location sharing seemed more pressing. Instead of introducing the privacy issue to discuss potentially problematic aspects, we had inadvertently created a game in which—ironically—those who were not tracked were the losers.[2]

A similar situation arose during my participant observations at a school. While a group of students was sitting around a computer in a classroom, talking during self-study, someone suggested searching Google for pictures of their teachers. After some giggling about the old haircuts of their teachers they had unearthed online, they began googling themselves. One by one, they typed their names into the search bar. Anton was thrilled. An extroverted boy and class president, he quickly popped up after typing in his name, because a local magazine had recently done an interview with him. Tim also beamed with delight when his friends found pictures of him in a football outfit next to his team, grinning broadly at the camera. Most of the youths I spoke with used private channels on Instagram and Snapchat (both platforms offered the option to either lock the profile or make it publicly visible). The parts of the public persona they found on Google were not perceived as a threat to privacy but as something prestigious to be proud of. Moreover, both cases involved images and content posted by adults in the context of a magazine or a football club. None of it was a self-made, self-optimized image of themselves or a brand co-constructed between

them and Google. Instead, they found fragments of their lives shared by adults. Peter, on the other hand, managed the group's expectations by proclaiming, "I don't think there's anything about me there." Like the boy in the workshop, he expressed disappointment at being invisible on Google.

In both examples, the issue of privacy was not assessed in terms of abstract and impersonal business models, legal issues, and ownership, but in the context of playful interaction with tools among friends. Not being tracked here also meant being somewhat invisible in social terms. There is another important layer to such practices—sharing data with companies like Google was also perceived as a fun activity because the digital compass was redefined as a playful space of social interaction. When the disclosure of personal information in digital dwellings becomes playful and social, potential privacy concerns recede even further into the background.

The public has been concerned about privacy since the spread of telegraphs and telephones, as the black box of communication was an essential part of this disembodied communication. Unlike a broken seal, the breaking of a signal does not necessarily leave a trace. The centralization of communications in the hands of the state was worrying in terms of potential surveillance, and private companies were not trusted for various other reasons, including vulnerability to fraud (Bonea et al. 2019: 65). The concerns expressed by young people in my research, however, rarely overlapped with the concerns expressed in much of the public discourse in Austria and within the European Union (providing a legal framework for privacy). Again, the lack of concern for privacy, widely seen as a failure of digital literacy when diagnosed in young people, is not just down to brilliant design. Attitudes to privacy also depend on context. As anthropologists have pointed out, a potential lack of privacy is not generally perceived as problematic. For many young people around the world, online spaces do not necessarily pose a threat, but rather offer privacy away from parental gaze and social pressure, especially in restrictive settings (Costa 2016; Horst and Miller [2003] 2020a; Hjorth, Pink, and Horst 2018; Slama 2010; Wang 2016).

Here, too, smartphones are following in the footsteps of earlier technologies used to circumvent control. According to Laura Ahearn (2001), the increase in love letters resulting from the rise of literacy in Nepal had a reinforcing effect on the transition from arranged marriages to love marriages because they provided channels of communication previously unavailable to the separated genders. But there are other reasons why attitudes to privacy may vary. The anthropologist Payal Arora (2019), for example, compared the findings from her

research with young people in a Brazilian favela and an Indian slum. While the young people in both environments saw Facebook as a positive place full of humor, motivational content, and beautiful images in contrast to the dangerous circumstances they grew up in, they had different concerns about privacy. In the Brazilian slum, young people expressed disdain and anger toward targeted advertising. The depiction of things they could not afford was perceived by some as cruel and hurtful. This reflected their distrust and expectation of fraud that they observed in their environment. In contrast, youth at her Indian field site appreciated the curation and time-saving efficiency of the targeted advertising because being online was seen as costly, and there was less expectation of being defrauded. Apart from the potential of digital media technologies to afford rather than constrict privacy, young people have their own strategies for figuring out how much privacy is enough for them—such as using disappearing messages or fake accounts to avoid being monitored by parents and companies.

Insignificant Transactions and Effortless Habits

So, what does the smartphone turn into when digital designers and developers concoct playful spaces based on Maschio's "architecture of happiness"? Does the gamification of digital interfaces also mean that smartphones are becoming toys that allow users to create pockets of happiness, solace, and magic? To view smartphones as toys on the one hand, or simply functional objects with a superficial overlay of colorful playfulness on the other, would miss the ambiguity of smartphone use. To understand smartphones' playful dimension, one must first define what "playful" means. Moreover, understanding the boundaries of "playful" and "nonplayful" goes hand in hand with understanding how smartphones fill the everyday spheres of life while seeping from offline to online and vice versa.

The previous decades-long research on the ambiguous boundaries between play and nonplay is useful when examining the playfulness of smartphones (see Taylor 2009; Boellstorff 2008; Goldman [1998] 2020; Hamayon 2016; Hjorth and Chan 2009; Lancy 1980; Malaby 2009; Nardi 2010; Sawyer 2013; Watson 2015). Even early scholars like Johan Huizinga, in his seminal work *Homo Ludens* ([1938] 1956), noted that a precise distinction between play and nonplay is not entirely possible, despite what he defined as the "magic circle" of play—an idea that frames play through quasi-ritual boundaries. For Huizinga, even cultural activities such as cooperation, competition, and improvisation are playful,

although they are not play per se. Similarly, the game scholar Brian Sutton-Smith distinguished between "play" (form and content) and "playful" (the playful mood) (1997: 148), a kind of mood that can quickly converge with the mundane (Handelman 2001: 215). Smartphones bring both play and playfulness in form and content, but they are also a playful technology that disrupts and stirs up the everyday. Pulsating, colorful interfaces are fun in that they playfully interact with users through text, emoji, and relatable icons. In doing so, the ambiguous playful is deliberately mixed with the nonplayful to inject uncertainty and make the typically nonplayful areas more exciting and engaging. Especially in the context of social media and mobile games, "playfulness" permeates social spaces (Sicart 2014), inviting users to linger and wander without purpose. Everyday moments can thus be stirred with the serendipitous buzz of an endless flow of content and playful interaction.

This fuzziness not only makes the distinction between play and nonplay difficult, but also that between casual and noncasual play—the former usually associated with smartphones. Scholars like Larissa Hjorth and Michael Arnold (2013) and Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson (2014) have, for instance, criticized such distinctions and the assumption that the term "casual" suggests superficial brief engagement, while casual games are often portrayed in public discourse as addictive, distracting, and time-consuming intrusions into everyday life, and thus as a meaningless and trivial waste of time (2014: 47). Instead of "casual" the authors use the term "ambient play" to describe the playfulness associated with the overlapping spaces of social media sites and games on social media that also seep into everyday life. The term "ambient" here is meant to not only capture the aural experience of playfulness; it also seeks to highlight the textural, tactile, and affective dimensions of it (60). But ambient play also involves "copresence"—new ways of being together (playing) across distances, which is one of the main reasons why such games are attractive. The ambient play of mobile games is another "technology of presence," in the tradition of earlier ways of constructing intimacy across distance through letters, postcards, and emails (Milne 2012). This ambient sociality adds an explicitly playful dimension to the multilateral sociality of practices like scrolling or snapping. Yet, understanding "the playful" simply as a playful mood does not fully capture the commercial intentionality of habit-building design.

Even in the 1930s, when Huizinga wrote *Homo Ludens*, he was careful to portray "the playful" as innocent play. Indeed, Huizinga saw an almost magical, profit-free space of play endangered by commercial interests. In a world where the video game industry makes billions of dollars, this rings true. Popular video games such as *World of War-*

craft have been described as "capitalist fairytales" by scholars such as Scott Rettberg, who emphasizes that the ideologies propagated within *WoW*, including the literal advertising of corporations present in digital worlds, are inextricably linked to the corporations that profit from them (2008: 20). Such theorizing, however, can have reductionist undertones, as Jaron Harambam, Stef Aupers, and Dick Houtman (2011) note. For these authors, the simplistic distinction between inherently "good play" and "bad capitalism" overlooks the nuances of capitalism, which extracts value but also gives rise to the complicated worlds of play in the first place. As they highlight, the elaborate worlds of video games would not have been possible without the capitalist resources that went into their costly development. However, unlike games like *WoW*, which mainly profited from subscriptions services, casual games tend to have less straightforward business models and must either sell advertising or increasingly collect microtransactions (Zendle et al. 2020). Here, previously straightforward transparent transactions morph into a long-term cat-and-mouse dance.

So, is the smartphone a site of an architecture of happiness? Mobile phones have come a long way from relatively simple communication devices. Much like television sets, mobile screens initially appeared as miniature windows into black-and-white, yet novel, worlds. As features expanded, screens grew in size, and so did functionality and opportunities for playful pastimes. Simple games like the iconic *Snake* game on the Nokia 3310 were one of the first approaches to entertainment on a cell phone. With larger screens and increasing computing power, color appeared and haptic touchscreens enabled embodied play. Colorful, vibrant, interactive interfaces began to anticipate the user's needs and become sensitive to the data that fingers leave behind. As I have shown, however, even when young men like Erkan enjoy spending their time scrolling through Instagram feeds, detachment from the world around them persists and is woven into this temporary distraction. The pleasure of the "architecture of happiness" in smartphones does not stand for itself, neither in terms of its commercial goals nor in terms of its escapism. The smartphone, then, is a constant quick-change artist that can instantly and temporarily transform into a toy without necessarily being one. Its functions exist in different digital heterotopias. In other words, smartphones are somewhere in between—not by accident but by design. Smartphones, consequently, not only open up playful spaces by design, in addition to the social and commercial ones already discussed, but also allow users to switch easily between quick entertainment, playful creativity, and function. It is precisely the diffusion of boundaries between clearly marked social conversations, consumption,

and play that makes smartphones suitable for nesting in the habits, routines, and mundane moments of everyday life (Jovičić, Hristova, and Göbl 2019).

Perhaps it is this ambiguity—between an intimate home and space of comfort and the commercialized spaces with predatory, "capturing" tendencies—that has influenced the polarizing way smartphone use is perceived, even among young users stuck between the pleasurable playfulness and the guilt of "wasting time" online. Young people are also trying to navigate a world in which commercialized digital spaces are neither an exception nor a problem but simply there. They are an integral part of the world where Admiral betting shops compete with *Dragon Ball*, billboards compete with native ads on Instagram, and scrolling sessions compete with strolling sessions through urban arcades of sociality, playfulness, and commercialization. One ephemeral, banal scroll, microtransaction, or snapshot at a time—digital spaces are inhabited and fit into existing routines and communication flows. As addressed in the previous chapter, walking through the arcades places the flâneurs in a hybrid realm between inside and outside, between the mundane and the playful, the commercial and the social. The flâneurs find themselves in all these spaces simultaneously. From the Roman flâneurs walking along the workshops of the Roman Empire, to Walter Benjamin's aristocratic Parisiens, to the video arcades of the 1970s that embedded games and gambling machines in highly social settings hovering somewhere between the dangerous, isolated spaces of casinos and innocent fun purchased for no more than a few cents—contemporary digital arcades continue along similar lines. Playful online spaces are also situated in a hybrid realm of the in-between, a kind of Rorschach test that provides a surface for projecting personal interpretations of the in-between.

It is essential to consider this lived ambiguity of design when framing hidden persuasion built within the architecture of playful digital technologies as "dark patterns." As Alex Beattie (2019) points out, dark patterns of design are indeed *gray* rather than dark. And as Nick Seaver argues in the context of "persuasive" technology, design operates in the "blurry middle," where the "traps" of captivating screens also rely on cooperation, not simply coercion (2018: 427). They rely on the consent of the captured, "the raccoon whose hand is caught in a jar because it is trying to catch hold of something within the jar" (Seaver 2016). Digital flâneurs, along with content creators, voluntarily engage in "playbour" (Kücklich 2005) and cocreate digital spaces either by literally building in-game worlds or through fleeting, playful strolls. Yet, this opens up a number of other questions that would need to be discussed in a different context—do the traps rely on the consent of the trapped? How is

consent defined in the context of the disadvantaged or young users who are free to make their own choices but are also prevented from looking too closely behind the screens and penetrating the invisible walls of terms and conditions? Are such playful, capitalist spaces still fair play if the rules of the game are not fully understood?

Conclusion

Playful design often lends a sheeplike appearance to practices aimed primarily at young and disadvantaged users, transforming the mundane into something more engaging and ultimately generating value and revenue. Despite their playful nature, these worlds are not just "magic circles" or innocent spaces of childlike play but created heterotopias that rely on capital to survive, even if that means specifically targeting younger users who may be more susceptible to the nudges by design in which microtransactions are cleverly embedded. One of the critical goals of gamification is to transform the boring into the engaging and playful—attractive promises in the context of chronic boredom in particular. This is not, however, a simple story of time-devouring technologies blindly casting a spell on everyone who dares to glance at them. Gamified spaces are also spaces to dwell, to be, to enjoy, or to pass the time rather than suffer through it—just as they are a way for designers to make their product engaging, simple, and fun. Smartphones and apps are neither toys nor purely functional; they invite "play" and fiddling with the phone simply for the sake of playing. They do not require a conscious decision to use a phone feature, play a particular game, or adhere to predetermined patterns of use. Snapchat streaks may induce habits, but that does not preclude creative workarounds, such as "black snaps" to save time and effort. Rather than blindly bowing to social and temporal pressures, snapping has nonetheless been integrated into daily rituals and frames of convenience. Microtransactions may be barely perceptible, but that does not mean that young people do not reflect the perceived danger of "this thing," as Nour pointed out, while holding up his smartphone. Some of the design mechanics may be a "dark pattern," part of an invisible infrastructure designed to direct the user into darkness, but this does not mean that teen users tap in the dark or are inattentive to it. Advertising may try to blend in and become invisible, but that does not mean it is not accepted as a (legitimate) business model. Knowing that your data is stored on Google's server is not necessarily a cause for concern if it means that you can play around

with your statistics with peers. The trade-off is an intrinsic part of digital environments, where arcades merge play, sociality, and commerciality.

So far, I have explored how uneventful practices of scrolling, swiping, snapping, and playing unfold within digital environments and how they are linked to commercial agendas and design ideologies that aim to enchant digital flâneurs and make their strolls as effortless and enjoyable as possible, so that the small investments of time and attention are barely noticed. But how do these noneventful practices, as ambivalent and contextual as they are, turn into wasted time? The last part of the book examines these questions through the notions of space and time.

Notes

1. Discussed at length in Jovičić, Göbl, and Hristova (2019).
2. In fact, when Google started deleting Timeline data from their cloud and encouraging users to save the data to their local devices in 2023, this led to an outcry on Reddit forums, with users grieving loss of data.

CHAPTER 6

Wasting Time

See how the spirit of the idle youth is, so to say, paralysed. They do not stay awake over the study of the one and only honourable art (i.e. eloquence). Sleep and indolence and enthusiasm for acts more shameful than either of these have seized hold of their minds. An ignominious passion for dance and song keeps the effeminates in its hold.

Seneca the Elder, Roman writer (54 BC–AD 39)
(in Laes and Strubbe 2014: 139)

Introduction

"Who used social media when they didn't have time?" my colleagues and I asked at a school workshop, which we typically prefaced with a discussion of pervasive assumptions about social media. The workshops focused on a codesign of a game we were developing with school students, which was supposed to provide a space to reflect on social media and its gamification habits (Göbl et al. 2021). Promptly, students aged thirteen to sixteen raised their voting cards in the air. We faced a sea of green cards signaling *yes*, and the students giggled and laughed. In several later workshops, we encountered the same response—an acknowledgment of our question, head nods, a wave of laughter, and students looking at each other with a shared sense of guilty pleasure. One student remarked, "Actually, we always have something to do for school, but before you do something . . . you end up on the internet anyway, even though you don't have time for it."

When asked why, another student responded, "Because you don't feel like doing anything for school, and you need something to kill time."

This also coincided with my observations at the school where I conducted part of my ethnographic research. Students either did homework or hung out on their cell phones during self-study classes (which was accepted, as long as they did not disturb others); or they slept with their heads leaning heavily on the desk, like Gregor, the young man who occasionally played video games through the night. Sometimes homework was exchanged or interrupted, including scrolling sessions on Instagram, snapping on Snapchat, or playing mobile games. Sometimes, however, a tricky math assignment would draw the attention of an entire group, who would gather around the desk without anyone even touching their smartphone for the entire forty-five minutes. Similarly, during codesign workshops, those who engaged in the (voluntary and ungraded) prototyping process might stand around a paper prototype, excitedly racing to finish it on time, startled and annoyed by the school bell that interrupted them. In those moments smartphones were cast aside, sending attention-hungry lights and vibrations into the ether. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that those moments were underrepresented in interdisciplinary scholarship and public discourse on youths and smartphones—all the moments in which smartphones were ignored or were used because there was nothing else to do. This seemingly selective perception was also reflected in my conversations with youths.

Marko, for example, remarked that it was a shame that he was "wasting time for nothing actually" (see introduction). He also noted that it was a pity because he could "have learned something during this time or could have done something sensible."

"How much time do you spend on your smartphone every day?" I asked him as we sat down for an interview during an open-study class. His hands rested on the lightly scratched school table as he thought for a while, the faint voices of his peers in the background. "Probably two to three hours. But wait, I can check," he remarked as he pulled out his smartphone, swiped up to unlock it, and looked for the Instagram app. "On Instagram, you can see how long you use it for." He then showed me his daily average: It read one hour and fifty minutes. "So yeah, probably it's around two to three hours in total," he concluded, and went on to explain what he mainly does online: "I give a like from time to time, but only to good friends, and I don't follow too many people. I am not interested in what other people do . . ."

"But you do spend the one hour fifty with something?" I inquired.

"Sure," Marko replied: "I watch funny videos, but it's not much more than that . . . Sometimes I ask myself what I do for two hours. I don't know myself."

"Can you control it?" I asked, wanting to know.

"No idea. I am simply on the phone . . ." he concluded.

Interestingly, however, Marko also explained that he often plays mobile games on his smartphone "just like this . . . just to kill time. Actually, I play only when I'm waiting, for example—otherwise not at all." This contradiction between feeling guilty about "wasted" time on the one hand, and the fact that most young people reported using their smartphones when they were bored with an activity (or lack thereof) and actually wanted to kill time, on the other hand, struck me as intriguing. What is it that turns hanging out, doing nothing or doing nonsense, scrolling or swiping, playing or snapping—practices that mostly make up everyday life in digital environments, as described in previous chapters, into "wasted time," particularly if the time they spent with it was to be killed anyway? Part of this question was discussed in the previous chapters, which explored the "spell" that Marko also spoke of—the flow of scrolling or the playful entanglement with the daily rituals of snapping. This in-between design, which erases effort, is meant to dilute time. But that alone does not explain the prevailing notion of "wasted" as opposed to productive, "sensible" time. In this chapter I aim to come full circle to the questions raised at the beginning of this book. The contradictions surrounding "wasted" time are examined empirically and placed in a broader historical context that favors productivity over idleness—preferences that are also often implicit in literature on digital literacy.

Guilty Pleasure

I have condensed the repeated giggles that accompanied our question ("Who used social media when they didn't have time?"), and the pervasive ambiguities underpinning digital media technology use—from the apparent pleasure of having a smartphone nearby to the guilty conscience linked to "spending" time online—into a broader category of "guilty pleasure." The sense of (what I interpreted as) guilt also represented a connection between broader popularized narratives problematizing the use of digital media technologies and my interlocutors, who often agreed with the notion that their time was wasted—an attitude we repeatedly encountered, for example, in one of our serious game codesign school workshops. The mobile serious game (*OutSmart*) was an attempt to engage young people in creating a reflexive space where challenges related to social media and gaming could be discussed, as opposed to enacting top-down digital literacy interventions. *OutSmart*, which was developed together with pupils from several Viennese schools,

centered around a character who downloaded an app without reading the terms of use and was then sucked into the smartphone and had to overcome various challenges in order to escape (Göbl et al. 2021). This particular workshop involved playtesting, with students invited to provide feedback on a game module that we had developed with input from their peers in other classes. The module included an NPC (non-playable character) in the form of a talking hourglass that urged the player to trade their time for collecting flames—an allusion to Snapchat streaks (flames in German) that can be collected if a snap is exchanged within twenty-four hours. The player had to weigh the pleasure of collecting flames against the loss of valuable time that could prevent the player from completing the game and thus from exiting before time ran out. This element of the story was intended to capture and address the ambivalence of "guilty pleasure," rather than to teach students how not to "waste" time from a behavioristic point of view. Using the game as an example, we began a discussion about "wasted time" when I asked students if they felt they were "wasting" time online. For one student, this was definitely the case: "I invest a lot of time in YouTube. I waste a hundred percent of my life time, and I'm trying to change that. . . . I think this is true for all people." His classmate added: "I waste time even though I don't want to." Another student also confirmed:

> Yeah, definitely. I watch a lot of series and stuff on YouTube, Insta, or something. I would say that I could have done something else during that time that would be more conducive to creativity, but instead, I'm not doing anything real. Insta and YouTube do take away a lot of time.

So if the popular narratives are echoed by young people, too, can we dismiss the premise of this book, that is, to complicate the view of digital practices? Not quite. During our group discussions, lively, dynamic peer discourse often occurred. These debates went back and forth as students tried to make sense of the negative social discourses they were familiar with, their feelings of guilt about wasting time, and their simultaneous enjoyment of smartphones and being online. To stimulate discussion, we included the question of whether social media made their lives better. The responses demonstrate the ambiguity of this nuanced issue:

- Sometimes.
- 100 percent.
- No, because I lose time when I could be doing something else, but instead I spend time with it.

- Well, I don't know if it's better, but maybe funnier.
- Oh yeah, I love memes—they make my life better.
- They don't make it better, but you feel better afterward.
- Actually, my grades have gotten worse because I'm online.
- But it's about self-control—it's not social media's fault.

Several youths, including Anita, a student at the school where I conducted my observations, reported turning off their smartphones when they felt distracted or when using other strategies of disconnection. There was still a pervasive sense, however, of losing track of time and not really being in control. As Elija Cassidy would put it (2016: 223), such "participatory reluctance" means that we regularly choose to be on social media, even if sometimes we would rather not. As the workshop participants' final response suggested, mixed in with the guilt was the notion that controlling the lure of vibrant online worlds and smartphones was a matter of discipline and control. When the fourteen participants in the same workshop were asked how many of them forget time when they are online, only two did not raise their hands. When asked why, one student replied, "I'm online when I'm on the tram and have nothing else to do. But then I know that the time for that is over." The idea of maturing and growing out of doing silly things was another common trope. This observation mainly concerned the emotional engagement with Snapchat streaks or desire for likes and followers on social media (Hristova et al. 2022), as well as extensive gaming or susceptibility to microtransactions in mobile games (see chapters 5 and 6). Hammed, the model airplane fan, distanced himself from gaming: "I used to play every day. Now I play only when I have time in the evenings or on weekends. I realized that I don't really need it, and I can control myself." For Lena, a workshop participant, being concerned with the number of followers and likes on Instagram was important when she was younger. Then the act of distancing herself took a controversial turn when she noted, "I don't want to sound mean, but it also depends on your level of education. If you have important things to do in your life, you don't care about this." Criticism came promptly when a classmate challenged her. "So just because I care about these things, I'm dumber than you?"

It is no coincidence that this discussion quickly drifted into moralizing territory. In the introduction to this book, some examples of such debates were presented related to books, music, novels or telephones, particularly with regard to young people. Since the advent of children's entertainment, there has been criticism of trashy entertainment and hedonistic play. Criticism that, as previously argued, is indicative of the values prevalent in a society. Mizuko Ito, for instance, writes how in the

West, "competitive achievement that individuates learning and produces class distinction is considered prosocial and developmentally correct. Hedonistic play that creates peer solidarity in relation to consumer culture is considered antisocial and regressive" (2005: 100). This characterization is unlikely to have escaped my interlocutors. The US-based students of the media anthropologists Mark A. Peterson, for example, spoke in similar terms about television, attempting to justify "vegging out" (an escapist state of switching off and reducing mental engagement) with the hurried explanation of why they earned the right to do nothing (after hard work, for example). Surveys of media consumers often produce a similar discomfort when it comes to admitting the pleasure of watching something that might be considered vulgar (Peterson 2005: 138–39). In countries such as Austria, with a long Catholic tradition, hedonistic activities and the incitement of guilt are deeply rooted. One famous example comes from Johannes Capistranus, one of the most prolific Franciscan wandering preachers and military leaders, who rose to fame through his military victories against the Turkish invasion that came close to Vienna in the fifteenth century—a historical event so celebrated in the Austrian imagination that his statue still adorns the facade of Vienna's main cathedral—Saint Stephen's Cathedral. Capistranus, who was later canonized by the Catholic Church, not only spread antisemitic hatred and incited pogroms against Jews but was also famous for his popular public sermons in which he condemned luxury goods, such as shoes, hats, wigs and makeup, and games of all kinds. But his enthusiasm for labeling games as the work of the devil did not stop there—he initiated spectacular burnings of games, including, in the year 1452, the burning of 76 pairs of fashionable shoes, 3,612 board games, and 20,000 dice in Nuremberg, Germany, all at once. Although his sermon and the burning of games in Vienna in 1451 probably did little to dampen the long-term enjoyment of games, such historical accounts are a reminder of the long history of powerful narratives that attached guilt to play and idleness (Matthes and Junge 2021).

In many of the current narratives surrounding digital media, guilt and control seem inevitably intertwined, with self-control providing a seemingly obvious solution to guilt. As anthropologists have long argued, guilt is not a universal, distinctive emotion but a sociocultural construct interlinked with differing notions of personhood across historical, social, and cultural settings and closely related to shame (Benedict 1946; Creighton 1990; Fessler 2004; Hollan 2012; Lebra 1983). The concepts of both guilt and shame as cultural constructs are interesting in that they relate the individual to broader social expectations and sanctions surrounding appropriate behavior, in relation to "the

other," whoever or whatever that may be (Lebra 1983: 193). Regardless of whether one would superimpose guilt or shame as an appropriate category, the narratives of my interlocutors point to the negative feelings triggered by real or imagined (discursive) perspectives of others on one's own behavior and self. In this context, the other is the collective notion of abstract time spent on something else, ideally something real, meaningful, creative, or productive. Between the guilt attached to "wasted" time and abstract time spent on "something else" lies the promise of individual self-control and discipline that some of the interlocutors assumed: It is up to the individual to live up to the ideal of spending time on other activities, and it is also individual weaknesses such as age, education, and digital literacy that seem to prevent the individual from achieving the imagined goal. This idea of the mature (in age and self-control) individual responsible for controlling time spent on guilty pleasures is reproduced in measures popular with smartphone operating system manufacturers. Apple and Google (Android), for instance, introduced features that indicate how much time has been spent on the smartphone, implicitly "quantifying" guilt. Users can thus face their conscience by simply checking their smartphone, which now offers them a solidified reminder that this time should be measured and, ideally, controlled. Ironically, it is not uncommon to see discourses on digital detox refer to mindfulness as a means of exercising control. In their study of US Facebook users, communication scholars Nancy K. Baym, Kelly B. Wagman, and Christopher J. Persaud (2020) noticed that their study participants differentiated between "mindful" and "wasteful" Facebook practices. The tropes they used were rooted in the Western understanding of Buddhist spiritualism, in which mindfulness is despiritualized and distilled into secular tools for the proper use of technology. Instead of Buddhist spiritual goals and the rejection of worldly desires, the hope of productivity takes center stage. In this context, distinguishing between wasteful and mindful practices arguably helps their participants justify at least some of the ways in which they used Facebook productively while maintaining a sense of agency (Baym, Wagman, and Persaud 2020: 2–5).

Examining guilt in the social context in which it occurs again reveals a bigger, mostly hidden picture. The young people I met, especially in public schools, felt guilty less because they were online but because they were not studying—a significant difference. This was evident, for example, in Marko's account of his daily activities. Marko was a loud, dominant character, who was popular but often scolded by teachers and who struggled with several subjects at school. He tried to attend a grammar school but failed a class and realized that the wide range of subjects of-

fered there did not interest him. He transferred to a HAK (a vocational high school), where he got into trouble and was expelled from the school: "But I wasn't ready for an apprenticeship, so somehow through contacts we managed to find a place for me at this school." Apart from occasional visits to the gym, he did not go out during the week:

> During the week I don't want to do anything. I stay at home. On weekends I go out with friends, maybe once or twice a month to a party, otherwise to a shisha bar. During the week I don't want to do anything because of school. Especially when I have to study, it distracts me. I can't relax, I just want to get by, live clean, and then at the weekend I let it out.

When I asked him what impact his smartphone has on his daily life, he replied, "It certainly has a big impact. Unfortunately, it's impossible to be without it. But you have to have your limits. I realized that if I'm on my phone too much, so much time is lost for school. It's not good." For Marko, weekends are the only time for legitimate leisure that allows for relaxation, the only time when the possibility of productivity is suspended without guilt. Several other pupils similarly described having little time to get together during the week because of the amount of homework they had to do and the pressure they felt. Anita was one of them. She and her best friend Jana only met on the weekends. Smartphones, however, made up for it: "As soon as we get out of school, we text each other five minutes later. Or we're on Skype while we're doing homework." When leisure time is already riddled with after-school homework demands and pressure to stay on a "high-speed train," smartphones allow one to stay in touch during daily routines and nonevents. The conundrum seems solved, yet it leads to a vicious circle—students stay in to do their homework to comply with expectations and avoid feeling guilty, yet the desire to socialize, watch funny memes, and escape the obligations leads them online, which reinforces the guilt.

The notion of "guilty pleasure," which echoes in my interlocutors' negotiations of their digital practices, implies a balancing act between feelings of guilt on the one hand and pleasure within the "architecture of happiness" (chapter 5) in smartphones on the other. Just as guilt is embedded in social and cultural notions of expected behavior, happiness and pleasure are also subject to historical developments and social expectations. The concept of happiness has changed throughout European history from a state inextricably linked to a prosocial, virtuous life to an individualized, internal state detached from the social good and linked to changing concepts of personhood (McMahon 2008; Throop 2015). These changes, which intensified in the eighteenth century and

were related to the Enlightenment project, troubled philosophers such as Kant and de Tocqueville, who saw the pursuit of pleasure as in tension with the general social good, reason, and morality (McMahon 2008). A similar tension can be seen, to some extent, in the notion of guilty pleasure as used in this book. Young people's negotiations oscillate between the values of personal productivity and self-development as a social value necessary for a digitalized society and economy—and individual pleasure. Admissions of guilt, performative or not, proclaim knowledge of social expectations and discourses related to technology, while smirks indicate the seemingly individualistic and socially questionable pleasure of being online, while paradoxically sharing that pleasure collectively with peers in many cases.

These negotiations of guilty pleasure are certainly not universal but highly situational. For example, the anthropologist Rahul Rose has found in his research on attention in Banaras, India, that his interlocutors regarded attention as cultivated through practice, while his London-based interlocutors treated it as fixed—a limited resource depleted and manipulated, for instance, by technology use. Although his Banarasi interlocutors also saw smartphones as distracting, they did not view them as part of an attention "economy" or as something requiring control or causing depletion of attention (Rose, forthcoming). Although these findings are still preliminary, they raise interesting questions about whether and how the "sticky screens" of smartphones are fraught with guilt (and its various manifestations) in other social and cultural contexts.

Productivity

There are moments in qualitative, inductive research when a particular quote, a specific observation capable of changing the course of the research, stands out. Sometimes, it is an entirely new idea; sometimes, it is one sentence that verbalizes particularly well the previously implicit ideas that begin to solidify in this collaborative effort of knowledge cocreation. One of these moments was a quote from a student who participated in one of the codesign workshops. This student's remark—"if it is productive, it is not leisure"—crystallized the tension between expectations of "meaningful" free time and their lived experience of digital activities as playful relaxation.

When we started the serious game codesign process in schools, we first invited school students to an open discussion on social media. Not surprisingly, the invitation was met with silence. Not only did our initial method prove inappropriate, but it also highlighted an important prob-

lem in the field of digital literacy: Students seemed fed up with the topics, most of which were presented to them in a repetitive and sometimes dismissive manner by adults. Mentioning social media would occasionally be met with "oh no, not social media again" comments and some eye-rolling. Our initial failure to engage the group led us to a decision to introduce the next workshop by playing an intentionally provocative video called "Look Up" by the motivational speaker Gary Turk (2014). The video, which went viral on YouTube in 2014, features a young man making a series of popular, placative claims about how social media is harmful to social life. The video presents a world where a "bowed-head" generation is missing out on life, while the smartphone is presented as a sign that "real" life is suspended. Our goal was to bring in an entertaining summary of common assumptions about digital media use—a viral YouTube video—into the classroom context to stimulate the discussions we failed to inspire in previous workshops. The video's backstory follows a young man who crosses paths with a girl, falls in love with her, and leads a happy, heteronormative life, accompanied by dramatic music in the background. At some point, however, the mood of the music changes, and there is a dramatic twist. Time is turned back as the video reveals that the young man did not, in fact, meet the love of his life, because he did not "look up" from his phone when the girl crossed his path. The video is an emotional appeal to spend less time using devices. Given the black-and-white nature of the video, we expected a defensive response from the students. Instead, silence once again reigned, with a handful of students agreeing with the digital-dystopia message.

In a later workshop elsewhere, we added another video to curb the discussion—this time, a parody by a young YouTuber who turned all the statements from the previous video by Gary Turk on their head, introducing an alternative narrative and opening a discursive space for counterarguments. This strategy also failed, as it only inspired a few giggles and once again culminated in vague agreement, this time to opposite statements. Finally, we distilled the provocative statements from Gary Turk's original video and gave students green and red cards to raise if they agreed or disagreed with the statements we read aloud. The moment when students had to make a final decision and take a (visual) stand was also a moment when monolithic assumptions about social media began to crumble. Even students who initially immediately agreed with familiar mainstream assertions against digital media (e.g., social media is not productive use of time) began to question such generalizations, pointing out the incoherencies and weaknesses of these statements while reflecting on their actual everyday practice. It was at this point that the process of knowledge cocreation emerged. We sum-

marized the statements implied in the "Look Up" YouTube video, and we asked the class if they would agree with the statement that "online activities are less productive than painting or making music." This question was tied to the assumption presented in the video that time spent on social media is a missed opportunity to do something creative, such as art. Amid the discussion, one student's comment stood out, "But if it's productive, is it leisure? I see it as my free time, and I don't have to do things that are productive. If I want to be productive, it's not leisure for me."

When asked whether "online activities are less productive than painting or making music," group discussion participants usually juggled the nuanced experience of everyday use of digital media technologies with popular discourses—while also pointing to the uncertainties and contradictions that arose from trying to make sense of it. The following transcript demonstrated how they challenged each other's replies and pointed out contradictions with concrete examples:

- Yes, it [arts and music] is more productive than social media, but you still don't do it.
- Sure, it's better, but . . .
- I think both are productive.
- I think everything is like a hobby. Social media is a hobby. Sports is a hobby. It's not about which is more useful.
- Yeah, but if you make music, for example, it's not the same as using the social media all for yourself.
- Yes, but when you do sports, for example, you do something for your body, so it's productive.
- You can also be creative online . . . or make money.
- I watch Insta baking videos and save them for later and think "I'll do that sometime," but I never end up doing it even though I think "really cool" . . . If you actually do it, it's productive, but just saving it . . .
- But if the video is an inspiration to you?

A similar negotiation of guilty pleasure was also evident in another class where we initiated a group discussion with the same question:

- You can do useful things on social media, like watch a video.
- But that's not productive.
- But if it's for school?
- Yeah, but come on, how often do you really use it for school?

Usually, the crude, simplistic narratives extracted from the viral video began to disintegrate as the discussion progressed. In another workshop, we asked participants what they would do if smartphones and the internet disappeared. Again, the answers reflected ambiguity. One participant put it succinctly: "I would probably lose contact with many people. And then I would probably need some time to . . . and then maybe I would be . . . more productive, I think . . ."

The back and forth in these conversations highlights the difficulty in distinguishing what is productive and what is not, along with the sense of "wasted" time that is not invested in productive activities. Yet, it does not become entirely clear what constitutes productive activity and whether it is even truly desirable. Although the pull of guilt is evident, the promise of "being productive, I guess" remains vague. At the same time, as some participants pointed out, idle time on the internet is also an opportunity to be creative, make money, or watch a useful or stimulating video. The sheer volume of opportunities offered by digital media defy simple dichotomies between seemingly productive and unproductive activities. Pushing them into separate forms of entertainment or information creates constructed boundaries full of contradictions and unclear definitions of productivity and purposeful activities. Is scrolling that leads to watching a baking video on Instagram a sign of competent media use if it leads to inspiration? How "productive" is inspiration? Or is an inspirational and entertaining baking video a passive form of media consumption? Are digital memes, filters, and collages art?

Leisure

Notably, the question of the student who asked, "But if it's productive, is it leisure?" remains unanswered—why does it matter if practices on the smartphone are productive if they take place during free time? His question alludes to the relatively recent notion, prevalent in contemporary European nation-states, that leisure is a contested matter of discipline and control.

Looking at European history (including colonial regimes and the associated control of labor and leisure), it is hard to miss how the valuation and definition of leisure is fraught with implicit and explicit moral undertones, often related to class and taste (Wilke et al. 2021). This starts with terminology—terms such as *leisure* or *idleness* are associated with a variety of historical, political, and moral connotations that often run along intersecting lines—gender, class, ethnicity, and so on (Sonnleitner 2020). One such term is *Muße*, the German word for *leisure*,

now rarely used. Although the term refers to free time, it cannot be translated as either *leisure*, *idleness*, or *pleasure*. It has its origins in the ancient notion of creative and contemplative time. The term contrasts with the tedious labor of ordinary or enslaved people, but it is not the same as free time that can be spent on nonwork-related activities, such as commuting or resting from work (Dobler 2020). *Muße* contrasts with laziness, yet there is still an expectation of productivity, even if the results are not predetermined (Dobler 2020). The manner in which leisure time was to be structured in general and in relation to work was often determined by political and religious authorities, at least in theory. The historian Albert Schirrmeister (2020), for instance, has examined the discussion of public holidays by German scholars and religious (Protestant and Catholic) authorities in the eighteenth century. Although it was recognized that holidays and festivals follow agricultural rhythms and are necessary for productivity and part of human sociality in general, there were many concerns about engaging in illegitimate forms of "leisure" beyond religious activities—from gambling or alcohol consumption to falling out of the habit of work and succumbing to laziness. At the same time, public holidays were also a way of asserting religious and governmental authority, as they are structured and controlled by them. Therefore, public discussion since the sixteenth century has sought solutions to the problem, such as introducing half-day public holidays that still leave time for work, or encouraging local religious authorities to control and supervise festivities during public holidays. Austria was no exception: The idea of reducing the number of public holidays was taken up by Empress Maria Theresia and reaffirmed by Emperor Joseph II (Schirrmeister 2020).

Among the solutions to the problem of leisure was the promise of discipline through physical activity. In the edited volume *The Discipline of Leisure*, Simon Coleman and Tamara Kohn (2007) (along with most of the volume contributors) argue that sport, an example of a leisure activity, became a vehicle of discipline in nineteenth-century Europe when it was instrumentalized by nation-states to form national identities and to distinguish themselves from colonial subjects. The editors refer to Keith A. P. Sandiford's (1994) work on Victorian cricket, noting that the hedonistic, "pleasurable" diversions of the early industrial period, such as drinking and gambling, "were seen by fun-hating factory owners and respectable religious bodies and individuals as distracting from the serious business of industrial labour or spiritual sobriety" (Coleman and Kohn 2007: 11). This point can also be made in the Austrian case. The emergence of the category of "youth" gave rise to lively youth initiatives, many of which focused on sport and hiking in the romanticized

Alpine landscapes. They were linked to political agendas, including nationalist movements in Austria and Germany (see introduction). This instrumentalization of sport could also be observed in Red Vienna in the early twentieth century, when sponsored sporting events and an infrastructure for sporting activities for young workers were established. Gyms, sports grounds, and public swimming pools were set up in the newly built social housing and public facilities, not only for children but also for young people and adults. The political leaders encouraged the working class to get out of their dull workrooms and into the fresh air and engage in sporting activities. This was supposed to benefit the health of the "people" and remove them from the harmful influences of alcohol and vice (Bauer and Bauer 2024).

Coleman and Kohn (2007) also warn, however, that emphasizing the purely disciplinary aspect of sport in the context of broader political discourses distracts from the fact that sport is an entanglement of discipline and pleasure that constitute each other. And the historian Marco Swiniartzki (2020) points out that efforts to control laborers' leisure time were often circumvented by creative strategies to increase leisure. The prominence of disciplining discourses and efforts does not necessarily mean that it corresponds to the lived reality. Nevertheless, this historical perspective reveals that debates around leisure and free time have long been embedded in moral and cultural judgments. What counts as "productive" versus "idle" time is never neutral; rather, these distinctions reflect deeper social values and struggles over acceptable ways to spend time. This tension makes leisure a contested social terrain, where certain activities are celebrated as morally superior and virtuous while others are dismissed, sanctioned, or stigmatized. Contemporary narratives around smartphones carry many of the same underlying assumptions: positioning them into the realm of unhealthy, inauthentic, and morally dangerous leisure.

As discussed in the first part of the book, the digital literacy discourse draws on many such assessments of online leisure, including the notion that empowered users are equivalent to proficient and active users. The notion that online spaces are used inefficiently because they are not used as vehicles for school and career advancement is curious, given that the popularity of the internet was always driven by games and social networking, despite its early ties to the US military. Early text-based games and multiplayer dungeons drove early internet activities that were clearly located in the realm of leisure and social entertainment. Today's digital landscape is no different. Surveys of young people in Austria show that entertainment is still the most common online activity—with Netflix and YouTube among the most popular and widely used apps

(Saferinternet 2019). As a 2019 *Economist* article titled "How the Pursuit of Leisure Drives Internet Use" highlights, passing time is still "the essence of the internet." The authors rightly emphasize that the majority of smartphone revenue comes from game stores and apps that offer a "pastime," such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok—a pastime available to rural and urban children alike (*Economist* 2019), and a pastime of particular relevance to those who have limited access to costly alternatives. The digital anthropologist Payal Arora, quoted in this article, has conducted research in several countries of the Global South. In the first chapter of her book *The Next Billion Users* (2019), titled "The Leisure Divide," Arora critiques the widespread expectation that low-income youths should choose work over leisure when they go online. What these assumptions overlook, however, is that, at times, the "internet is the poor person's leisure economy" due to the lack of local and affordable alternatives (2019: 33).

But there is another important issue she highlights—the implicit prevalence of Maslow's outdated hierarchy of needs, which holds that people's need for pleasure comes last, after essential needs have been met. Arora, like many other researchers, cites many examples of development projects aimed at bringing social mobility and education to remote areas of the Global South that have failed. In one of her own projects at the cybercafe in the rural town of Almora, India, Arora expected the new broadband space to inspire young people to learn about issues affecting their community, including environmental or political challenges. Instead, the café became a meeting place for young people to chat and interact. There are many such examples of online spaces being used for gaming or pornography rather than homework and information gathering. Part of the surprise at such an unexpected development, says Arora, has to do with the moral panic that the sexuality and idleness of the lower classes can inspire in those who seek to bring prosperity through technocratic solutions. Arora's findings resonate with other ethnographic work on the use of digital media technologies in precarious conditions. Xinyuan Wang (2016), for example, who conducted research in a Chinese factory, concludes that mobile gaming can offer relief in the harsh reality of factory work and limited resources in terms of time, finances, or energy, thus representing a relaxing and available way to hang out with friends. Wang's work resonates with the conditions of precarity I observed in the symbolic waiting rooms, in which young people were put on hold through prolonged unemployment or underwhelming jobs. In fact, one of the reasons why the "pleasure telephone" of the early twentieth century, with its subscription services that brought music, sport, or sermons to the masses, was popularized had to

do with its relatively low price and with its potential to "democratize . . . the social luxuries of the rich" (Bonea et al. 2019: 63).

As one workshop participant emphasized, "social media" can be considered a "hobby." The student hints at something important here—that a "hobby" is an artificial construct that highlights socially acceptable ways to pass the time, implying some sort of structure and discipline that distinguishes it from morally ambiguous "doing nothing." When I asked Cem, the seventeen-year-old young man who had immigrated from Turkey and was in the process of translating his school diplomas and waiting for a job, about his hobbies, he mentioned "going for a walk," "sitting on a park bench with friends," or "going to a club at the weekend." Online spaces expand the opportunities to engage in these types of hobbies. When there is little to do, hanging out in public places, whether park benches or social media, is sometimes all that fills the time—not as distinctive leisure time constructed in opposition to nonexistent work, but as a way to pass the time. Cem dreamed of visiting another city in Europe, like London or Paris, but he knew these dreams would remain a fantasy as long as he remained unemployed: "Of course, only if I get work, if not, nothing happens." In the meantime, he hung out in the parks, at the youth center, or on Snapchat. For Onur, the sixteen-year-old tiler who enjoyed playing mobile games with his friends after work, even this kind of entertainment could be too much after a day of lifting heavy packages of tiles. He was still able to cope with the strain on his back, having to carry around packages weighing twenty kilograms, but he worried about the future: "Some colleagues who are already over fifty have severe back pain, but I'm still young." Leisure cannot be separated from the structural circumstances in which second-generation migrant youths engage in manual labor and observe their parents entering early retirement due to the strenuous work conditions (Palmberger 2019). When I once asked Onur why he would leave early, he replied, "Today I'm tired. I can't play anymore. So I will probably go home and go to sleep because I have to leave for work early tomorrow." Even the hobby of hanging out on the sofa and playing mobile games requires effort, despite effortless design.

Cem and Onur were not passive internet users but very much participated in the intersecting social worlds available to them. Especially in a context where waiting is all-consuming or physical work requires an early start; where private space is limited in crowded homes, and commercialized entertainment venues like movie theaters are out of reach, smartphones are an easy, effortless way to hang out, spend time, and daydream out of sight of parents, bosses, and teachers. When statistical abstractions described, for instance in the JIM studies (Feierabend et al. 2019, 2020),

youths with lower educational backgrounds spending increasingly more time online, this can be seen as a symptom of different circumstances, not simply a problem of digital literacy and "deficit" media consumption. The question is not always only whether the youths *can* engage in the active, seemingly productive online activities—the question is also whether they *want* to—against the backdrop of strenuous work and school pressure when active, disciplined leisure time involves effort. Sometimes, active idleness is "pleasantly purposeless" (Pyyry and Tani 2019: 1226), an effortless yet rarely guilt-free way of unwinding from the pressures of everyday life. As one workshop participant noted, he preferred to hang out on social media and streaming platforms instead of exercising or doing homework. As he put it, "When I know I have to do something that's not fun and requires effort, especially when I'm tired, I tend to put it off and go online."

Mundane smartphone practices may also seem far removed from accepted institutionalized spaces for (day)dreaming. But smartphones also appear in these moments of transition: the period before falling asleep and after waking up, as some youths reported. This is particularly visible in "mass snaps" on Snapchat, in which good morning and good night messages are routinely exchanged among peers (see chapter 5). These morning and evening rituals are a way to get one last glimpse of the social buzz before falling asleep—yet screens are often portrayed as detrimental to sleep, for example, by citing blue light as the culprit. In contrast to the reassuring narratives of bedtime stories associated with parental care and a nurturing environment, and numerous studies demonstrating the positive, stress-reducing aspect of reading books before bed (Hall, Levy, and Preece 2018; Mindell and Williamson 2018), smartphone use before bed usually features in studies lamenting the harmful effects of screen time (Chang et al. 2015; Christensen et al. 2016). Yet, smartphones are more than just interfaces that emit harmful light; as some of the youths pointed out, they are often also used as reading devices. Chan, for example, whom I met in private school, was a good student and an avid reader of fiction novels, which she read in English. It was not uncommon to see her yawning in class after spending the night reading a book, usually a well-known classic, on her smartphone. Moreover, the social dimension of media also means that scrolling quickly through one's feed can also be a reminder of one's social place in the world. Adolescents who lived in foster homes had neither the parental support nor the caregiving rituals their peers had—for them, the smartphone may provide reassuring social embeddedness while transitioning into sleep. The in-between design frames those moments of distraction and daydreaming in a context where (socially

accepted) chatting around a campfire at dawn has been replaced by WhatsApp groups, and the fire's flame has been replaced by Snapchat's flame emoji indicating streaks.

Distraction

One particular trigger for guilt in youths' narratives, reflecting the broader media discourse and psychological research on digital media, was engagement with digital media technologies as a form of distraction. It is easy to see why. A single distracting notification on just one phone could trigger a wave of smartphones crawling out of corners, pockets, and backpacks to populate the table in a wave of social contagion in youth centers, schools, or the employment lab. The giggles that indicated guilty pleasure in group discussion, however, mostly accompanied anecdotes about being online instead of doing homework. Homework can be profoundly boring. Sometimes, however, the burden of boredom can be shared, and smartphones have played an essential role in continuing social learning. Not only were they vehicles for copying and sharing homework, but they also continued to create a shared experience between classmates who lived in different parts of the city and went home after school, like Jana and Anita. However, this form of copresence also has its limits. Anita explained that smartphones can be distracting and that she sometimes turned off her phone to focus. Before cutting off her connection to the outside world, she usually informed her mother that she would be unavailable for a while. In most cases, smartphones are a welcome distraction, often in less stimulating situations that cannot compete with the excitement of checking for new messages and likes, much like the daily trip to the mailbox can represent a routine moment of anticipation.

This kind of welcome distraction is not only rooted in the potency of the smartphone itself but also in the boredom of everyday tasks and the preference for social learning among some. Sara, a thirteen-year-old girl and asylum seeker, was a regular visitor to the youth center. Her parents paid a symbolic amount for a semester of tutoring in math and German by a volunteer. The tutors supervised a group of several elementary and middle school students by helping them with their homework in a separate, quiet room above the youth center main area. Yet, even though she had paid for the tutoring, Sara preferred to stay downstairs, where she spread out her notebooks on the table normally used for games. In the early afternoon, the space surrounding her teemed with young visitors darting about and shrieking in exuberant play. But she enjoyed being surrounded by her peers while filling in the blanks of repetitive

sentences for her German class. Sometimes, her friends, who were fluent in German, were able to help her when they came over, looking for a fun new activity. She was also happy to take advantage of my interest in what she was doing by enlisting my help with her homework. After one such incident, we were both scolded by the youth center staff member, who reminded her that her mother had paid for the tutor and that she should do her homework upstairs. Smirking, she dismissed this as boring and happily continued to ignore the staff's gentle prodding on subsequent visits. She enjoyed being in a busy environment between studying and socializing. She avoided missing out on fun while doing a boring task that could be temporarily transformed into a social activity.

Although FOMO (a popular slang term for the "Fear of Missing Out") has become a widespread trope of digitalized sociality, it is hardly a new phenomenon. Smartphones are a portable dwelling and a portable way to replicate the excitement of vibrant sociality and participate in the hustle and bustle of the world—even in solitary or boring activities. In his research among British South Asian migrants, Marcus Banks, for instance, found himself at first irritated by the fact that his interlocutors kept watching television while he tried to interview them. He called television an "irrelevant and irritating distraction" (Banks and Zeitlyn 2015: 18). In later years, during his research in India, he saw the interview situation, with the television on, as a triple interview conducted with CNN journalists and his informants at the same time. For his interlocutors, television was yet another part of the environment, much like the smartphone was part of my interlocutors' digital environments. Banks later realized that the sense of disturbance and distraction was related to his own middle-class upbringing in Britain, where watching television when having visitors was considered rude (2015: 18). Indeed, the etiquette of listening to the radio and watching television varies greatly in different regions of the world, and it changes constantly depending on preexisting domestic rituals, architecture and space, signal reception or the availability and price of radio and television sets (Postill 2002).

The assumption that media use is a solitary, quiet, and concentrated activity is not universal. As Mark Allen Peterson (2005) argues, the idea that media consumption takes place in silence is ethnocentric and based on specific normative ideals that may vary across settings. He cites research showing that television and cinema can be a highly social and vocal experience—from shouting, laughing, crying, clapping, catcalling, and booing to jumping (Peterson 2005: 134). Similarly, smartphones rarely disrupt sociality inadvertently because of implicit rules about when it is appropriate to use them. These rules may not always be visible, but they exist nevertheless. Scrolling, like watching television,

need not be a solitary, isolating activity by default. The tension between smartphones as a cause of harmful distraction or as a welcome distraction that cancels out the tedium of everyday tasks is also reflected in psychological and cognitive research on distraction in digitalized environments. Some studies, particularly in the context of productivity research, have ambitiously measured how often employees are distracted by digital notifications such as emails (Mark et al. 2015). In one such study based in the United States, researchers found that participants checked their email frequently and regularly, whether or not they received a notification (Mark et al. 2016). This self-interruption, Mark and colleagues suggest, is thus a habitual response to frequent digital interruptions in the workplace, which can be detrimental to productivity. Similar concerns are being explored regarding adolescents. Research in this area searches for associations between screen media use and ADHD-related behaviors (Beyens, Piotrowski, and Valkenburg 2020), and researchers have analyzed the relationship between media multitasking and attention problems in students (van der Schuur et al. 2015, 2020). In most of these studies, however, attention problems are more or less tentatively attributed to media use, while broader aspects such as school pressure, social problems, or the adequacy of various school systems in general are left out.

The media scholar Susanna Paasonen (2016) has taken a different approach. She argues that distraction is not the opposite of attention but rather the other side of the same coin. She frames both as "rhythmic patterns in the affective fabric particular to the contemporary landscape of ubiquitous networked connectivity" (Paasonen 2016). When both work and play occur on the same devices, attention and distraction, Paasonen argues, merge. Paasonen also reminds us that the "diagnoses of distraction as a pervasive mode specific to late industrial societies and media-saturated cultures have been voiced for well over a century," whether in cinema, radio, or television (Paasonen 2016). The sociologist Judy Wajcman (2014) argues along similar lines. In her own research, Wajcman has examined the perception that ICTs lead to distractions at work or blur the boundaries between work and leisure. But while her research participants cited email in particular as a source of stress and distraction, she argues that this perception does not match actual observations and measurements of how they actually spent their time. On the contrary, she found that most of the distraction came from the workers themselves, while they used the asynchronous nature of ICT to manage their availability actively. Most calls and messages did not spill over from work to leisure, but the other way around—from leisure to work, when people communicated more with friends and family during working hours. The pressures associated with ICTs had little

to do with the machines themselves, but with the managerial control and surveillance practices now facilitated by ICTs, and with the fragmentation and flexibilization of work in general, which preceded the widespread adoption of ICTs. In her view, the demonization of email as a source of time pressure may have more to do with the fact that email has become a symbol of stress, partly because it visualizes the work that remains at the end of the day, rather than because the technology itself causes stress or distraction. Yet, in the context of excruciatingly dull homework, chronic waiting, unemployment, or dull work as a security guard—the opposite of distraction becomes not attention but boredom (see chapter 3).

From these perspectives, distraction emerges as a discourse closely tied to modern anxieties around technologies that so powerfully compete for our attention. When considered alongside prevailing narratives about productivity, these concerns recall the moral ideals embedded in what Max Weber called the Protestant work ethic, where he challenged Marxist materialism by arguing that Calvinist religious beliefs played a significant role in shaping the values of capitalism—particularly the sanctification of work and the association of productivity with moral citizenship. While Austria is a historically Catholic country—and many scholars have challenged Weber's emphasis on Protestantism as the decisive force behind the capitalist ethic, instead highlighting important economic and political factors (Becker and Woessmann 2009; Kersting, Wohnsiedler, and Wolf 2020)—the notion of the moral value of work resonates in the Austrian context, whether through the migration of Protestant craftspeople, the bureaucratic institutionalization of work (Tenbruck 2002), or Austria's close economic, political, and cultural ties with Germany. Indeed, reflecting on the experiences of the young people I encountered, one might ask: Is their primary source of guilt the distractive design of digital technologies, or rather the stress, expectations, and pressures stemming from a school system rooted in continual performance assessment?

Fake News and Make-Believe

In contrast to "passive" forms of being online, online exposure to information and news is often categorized as a positive, efficient, and thus desirable way of spending time online (see chapter 1). Concerns about potentially uninformed, entertainment-oriented online behavior are usually mentioned in the same breath as concerns about fake news or a lack of access to "real" news and young people's alleged disinterest in news and politics. But who defines what counts as news and where it

can be found? As mentioned earlier, traditional media outlets have long embraced social media, increasingly adapting its content to different platforms and age groups. Such sponsored content can be found in a person's recommendations or added to their personal feed. A casual scroll or walk through social media can also offer insight into the news, both through official sources and through community gossip and peer-to-peer exchanges in the same feed. After all, social media are not news-free areas but also represent public and community bulletin boards, just as they are full of private opportunities to share gossip and news. Moreover, in some regions where personal computer ownership has remained low, "googling" information has not automatically become a habit or a "proper" way to access information, and social messaging services like WhatsApp took on the role of information dissemination instead (Miller et al. 2021). In such contexts, a clear distinction between information and entertainment is illusory.

Nonetheless, the hyperlinked network of integrated apps and sharing buttons that connect different platforms also leads to an effortless blurring of genres, where spaces "for news" and sources cannot always be clearly assigned and separated, but (re)appear in different realms that one frequents. Lenny, for example, wrote and read short stories on a free app called Creepypasta—which also referenced YouTube videos. The app featured horror stories written by amateur authors. Lenny described the content as "mostly fictional stories, but sometimes it's reality, like here, because there's a YouTube video about it. Even the authors don't know if it's real or not, but somehow it might be," he concluded. Again, the transition from "enabled" and "passive" media use is blurred here. Lenny eventually showed me the Creepypasta app because he wanted to read his newly written story to me. After reading it, he read stories by other authors. He then announced that we should now watch funny YouTube videos. After we watched YouTubers eat insects, he played a twenty-minute video of cartoon characters fighting in a desert of subdued, dry yellow earth that merged with the cracks of his smartphone screen. We continued to watch as time passed, and he switched genres depending on his mood. Such shifts in atmospheres, moods, platforms, realities, and aesthetics are the common reality of media use, which rarely follows clear information or entertainment genres. When the genres merge, even a short horror story in the story app can reference a YouTube video. Finding that reference in the app and the source on YouTube could even give an overall impression of something that is repetitive, shared, and that potentially has a raison d'être.

Obviously, this blurring of the spaces of dwelling and sharing news complicates the question of what is real and what is not. Yet, under such

circumstances, young people sometimes construct their own evaluative criteria to navigate the spaces of news and gossip. Ambivalent stories shared in public spaces are also subject to peer discourse and fact-checking based on available references. One afternoon at the youth center, I joined a group of boys huddled around the computer. The screen displayed a low-budget YouTube video showing several men cautiously moving through a dark, creaky house. Armed with flashlights, the men exuded both fear and excitement as they hunted for clues, getting spooked when something moved or made a noise. The boys leaned in, eyes wide with a mixture of curiosity and nervous excitement. "You can see *real* ghosts here," one of them announced confidently. The clip was grainy and stretched out—a slow, suspenseful walk through shadowy rooms, the men jumping at every creak or shifting shadow. I asked the boy controlling the mouse where he had found this particular video. He shrugged nonchalantly. "Just like that," he said, then explained that it popped up through YouTube's algorithm-generated recommendations. As the minutes ticked by, he turned toward me again and again, his voice hushed. "Can the ghosts kill us? Can we kill them?" he wondered aloud, trying to make sense of the flickering, mysterious dark shots on the screen.

Before I could answer, his friend interjected in a pragmatic tone, saying, "They're already dead. What's the logic in killing them?"

Yet another chimed in, skeptical: "Science knows nothing about ghosts. They're not there." Although the general mood remained skeptical, they enjoyed the video and were disappointed when the dramatic arc was not sustained because the sixteen-minute video of the men walking through the unlit house had stretched everyone's attention, including mine. "It's not scary at all," concluded the boy leading this YouTube experience, before he moved on to another recommended video—this time a video of horror pranks.

What this situation demonstrates is not a dystopian world of "fake news" but an exercise in "make-believe": a playful and collaborative experience with like-minded peers. The story is enjoyed for the fun of it and is quickly exchanged for something more exciting if it does not captivate. Although Lenny wished that the exciting fictional story was real, he was aware of the overall fictional genre of the app—after all, he has written such stories himself. Nonetheless, Lenny and other YouTube viewers enjoyed the ambiguous excitement of storytelling based on the temporary suspension of disbelief. After all, the term "fake news" is also reminiscent of preexisting genres of legends and tall tales (Ellis 2018).

In the absence of peer exchange, these strategies of distinguishing trustworthy information can be highly personalized. As we stood around

the billiard tables at the youth center, Hammed, for example, explained how he approached YouTube videos:

> I usually watch YouTube to get information about something. Usually, the sources are underneath it, and you can look at it and compare it and see if it's fake news. For example, if I see that it's linked to German Broadcasting, I know it's not fake news. I sometimes look at it before I go to sleep.

After a brief pause, Hammed added with a grin, "But I also watch Netflix," admitting that he likes to spend his time watching "noninformative" content. With his technical aptitude and interests in model airplanes and the environment, Hammed was the outsider in his circle. As he continued to comment on political issues that interest him, including climate activist Greta Thunberg, his friends came over and made fun of him, playfully rolling their eyes and empathetically asking me whether "Hammed is pretending to be Wikipedia again." As they continued, Hammed shrugged, noting that he had tried to talk to his friends about climate issues and had convinced them to go to a protest, but they declined because they were not interested in the topic. His interest in politics not only gave him the status of an outsider but also made watching the news a solitary experience that was not shared by his classmates or those around him. Active engagement with politics could just as easily alienate him from his peer group. Engaging in this type of pastime thus becomes alienating and lonely, unlike the latest Netflix series—a guilty pleasure he also enjoyed and shared with peers.

As early as with the spread of printing in nineteenth-century Europe, concerns arose that people were being overwhelmed by the increasing amount of information. According to some contemporary experts, people were in danger of engaging with information superficially and in small bits rather than being able to critically sort through it (Bonea et al. 2019). For Clifford Allbutt, an English doctor and a professor at the University of Cambridge, there was also the danger that the idle, excitable, mind will start to crave the constant novelty of new bits of information—a concern reminiscent of debates on diminishing attention spans (2019: 21–23). Allbutt expected the emergence of new patterns in the brain, echoing the familiar warning that the brain is being rewired by the rapid fire of media content. In fact, the analogy of the brain being rewired goes back to early analogies comparing the workings of the brain to the wiring of the telegraph (21–23). As media forms change, so do people's strategies, just as we have adapted to the dissemination of earlier mass media. It is probably impossible to quantify how social media has truly changed news consumption, beyond the sensationalist

and politicized debates of "fake news." However, the world I encountered was certainly not a parallel, psychotic dystopia that overwhelmed young people and overturned their upbringing, their peer groups, and their sense of reality. News, in its contemporary institutionalized form, is a human-made construct emerging from a long history of rumors and conversations around wells, fireplaces, pubs, and kitchens. The extent of the ability of populist players to influence the discourses around the wells might have changed, yet there was never a time when news was a completely neutral and distinct genre, separate from "fake news," bias, propaganda, and agendas.

Political Participation

Active engagement in politics, in general, requires not only the ability but also the desire to do so and to engage in public space. But what participation in political and public space means, and how accessible and desirable it is, depends on the context. A number of young people I met did not hold Austrian passports, or did not have parents who both hold Austrian passports and are in the habit of voting. In several group discussions I had with the Turkish-speaking circle of friends in the youth center, passports and citizenships were discussed from the perspective of belonging. Under specific circumstances, young people born in Austria as noncitizens can decide which citizenship they will take once they turn eighteen (in this case, Austrian or Turkish). For most of the young men in the group, who were in their teens and thus close to making this decision, the choice was clear—the Turkish passport was preferred for reasons of identity and continuity, although some of them did not identify as either Austrian or Turkish. After Onur was asked if he felt more like a Turk or an Austrian, he said, "Kanake" (a pejorative term for Turks in German-speaking countries, often jokingly used by youths with Turkish ties themselves). In the ambivalent space of being neither here nor there, practical arguments for choosing the Austrian passport, such as travel privileges, counted for little. After all, most of these young men never traveled anywhere but Turkey, sometimes several times a year. Moreover, political participation was not a sufficient argument, given their affective ties to Turkey and their parents' citizenship. For many who were not born in Austria, though they grew up there, citizenship is not easy to achieve—hopeful citizens must prove that they have a certain monthly amount of money at their free disposal, after rent and other fixed costs. The threshold is particularly high for low-income youths and apprentices. According to the city of Vienna's integration monitoring, about 30 percent of the city's popula-

tion do not have the right to vote—and the trend is rising (Gaigg 2020). Efforts by youth center staff to engage visitors in discussions about political party platforms were often met with the comment "but I can't vote anyway" during the two elections that took place during my fieldwork, indicating how pointless the exercise of being "political" in this strict sense would be.

Yet, even if lack of citizenship is not a formal problem, general alienation from politics may also play a role. For example, Onur, the apprentice tiler, stated, "I don't care about politics. I don't know anything about it." Being political sometimes means mirroring the choices of parents. The political discussions and quizzes initiated by youth center staff revealed that there is a general feeling that socialist and leftist parties are "good," a feeling that is also reflected in the younger children's responses. For Tina, Samuel's eighteen-year-old friend, a trained makeup artist and Austrian citizen, the choice was clear: She announced she would vote for Sebastian Kurz, the conservative party leader who eventually won the election and became chancellor before resigning in 2021 following corruption charges. When I asked her why she wanted to vote for him, she mentioned that she did not usually read newspapers and was not really well informed, but that her mother had seen Kurz live once and thought he was "good," so now she thought he was good too. For her boyfriend Samuel, who, in contrast, preferred the Social Democratic Party, the election came second to more pressing issues. Although he had been looking forward to the elections, he later told me that he had failed to vote in time because he urgently needed to write job applications. This was a requirement for his welfare payments, and failure to do so would have jeopardized his government-subsidized housing.

Digital spaces are equally embedded in dynamics of political inclusion, exclusion, and belonging. Although online spaces such as Twitter (now X) were occasionally ascribed a democratizing and mobilizing power, for example in the context of the Arab Spring, they are not spaces of political engagement by default. The underlying assumption that public urban spaces are also political is entrenched in recent European history, as emerging coffeehouses enabled the European bourgeoisie to meet, exchange, and thus form during the eighteenth century. Public spaces thus became sites of political consciousness and debate (Habermas 1989). With the advent of social media, public debates could also move online into the digital public realm (Miller et al. 2016, 2021). Yet, as Daniel Miller et al. (2016) demonstrate, public space, including the public spheres of social media, is not a universal concept because the conceptualization of "public" may differ in different social and political contexts. Following her research among Turkish Kurds, Elisabetta

Costa (2016) argues that online spaces can be very conservative public arenas that are not seen as sites of free speech, political debate, and freedom but rather as sites of social control and state surveillance. Some of the young people I spoke with particularly pointed to the familial surveillance that takes place in these public spaces, and some parents also admitted to monitoring their children's profiles. The feeling of surveillance can be particularly pronounced when there is an immediate fear of police repercussions, as my failed attempt to recruit interviewees with the trigger term "interview" indicated. In addition, as several interlocutors mentioned, their reluctance to post content publicly on YouTube was related to the existence of potential "haters." Here, surveillance and social sanctions can come from unexpected places, namely anonymous strangers. Just because the internet has the potential to be used in this way does not mean that it automatically erases preexisting problems of political participation and public visibility, especially for noncitizens, as discussed in chapter 2.

Beside the external reasons for political participation (or lack thereof), political issues sometimes seemed far removed from personal reality and were of little relevance. However, one issue exceptionally caught everyone's attention during my fieldwork, because it was seen as relevant in everyday life. In 2019, public discourse in Austria was dominated by debates around Article 13, which would further tighten EU copyright law against the free use and reproduction of copyrighted content online. The issue was also raised by TikTok and YouTube influencers, who frequently work with such copyrighted content and who saw the freedom of digital creation threatened by influential, commercial content producers. Emir, an eighteen-year-old young man and reigning table football champion at the youth center, joined a group that included myself and the staff, on the sofa as we watched the preelection roundtable while gathered around the television. The TV was dramatically wheeled into the living area, especially for the occasion. Buoyed after an intense game of table football, he joined the discussion and steered the topic to Article 13, passionately defending his right to consume free digital content despite counterarguments from the staff, who argued that musicians deserve to be paid for their music and that, while his generation was used to getting music for free, that was not normal. Emir announced that he would vote for either the Greens or the NEOS—the young branch of the liberal-conservative party—based solely on the fact that they openly opposed Article 13. Emir was not alone, as the issue kept coming up during several months in which it was prominent in public discourse. His friend, for example, shared that he did not have a Twitter account, because he was not interested in politics: "I don't like

these things. I mean, my brother is in the socialist youth, but that's not for me. Except Article 13, because, of course, that affects me directly." Payal Arora's (2019) research in the Global South offers an explanation for similar attitudes toward piracy. In much of the Global South, piracy and the sharing economy are criminalized, even though piracy "is not a problem, not a crime, but instead a problem of pricing" (2019: 52), as many cannot afford the prices usually set by media conglomerates for Western audiences. This scarcity is sometimes exacerbated by the lack of entertainment alternatives such as cinemas, whereas local media production might be underfunded and not able to compete with the global market. In these contexts of global inequality, copying and distributing media content is not necessarily regarded as piracy by people who engage in it. In Brazil, for instance, the distribution of copyrighted material was framed in terms of care and sharing. In China, pirating media content can be seen in the context of the Chinese state, which promotes national educational content and restricts Western entertainment as "cultural polluters" (2019: 62). The Pirate Party, which began to spread in Europe just after the turn of the millennium, based on the premise of legalizing privacy, was in fact a reaction to the monopolization and monetization of the media.

As some students leave high school early for apprenticeships, social venues like youth centers and YouTube influencer channels are sometimes the only places where politics can become an issue and a conscious conversation, sometimes in unexpected ways. In 2019, a TikTok beauty influencer made headlines by unexpectedly turning her makeup tutorial into a public condemnation of China's treatment of Uyghurs (Kuo 2019), and TikTok also became entangled in US domestic politics after young TikTok users collectively sabotaged Donald Trump's primary campaign on multiple occasions (Lorenz, Browning, and Frenkel 2020). Whether offline or online, public political engagement is not a universal model of social participation that fits everyone's daily realities, habits, and circumstances. Social media may increase the diversity of available spaces, but it does not inherently have the magical power to radicalize or politicize youths who were previously uninterested in or had little apparent access to politics. Understanding mediatized politics is certainly essential and something that young people should not be left alone with. Yet, this is not an issue of digital literacy, but of media literacy as such. Online spaces are not fundamentally different in that their underlying politics and algorithmic background calculations remain invisible. On the contrary, sites like Wikipedia, which danah boyd (2014) believes are unfairly condemned as nonserious sources, can be more transparent than history books written at one point in time and

presented as the one single "true" version of history. On Wikipedia, the course of debates and negotiations of history remain documented in the background and are easily accessible (2014: 194).

COVID-19 and Productivity Redefined

In the early days of digital divide discourses, mere access to the internet could be conceived of as a privilege, and the amount of time spent online signified access to opportunities. However, statistics in Austria and Germany at the time of the research indicated that prolonged internet use correlates with lower socioeconomic status. For example, the representative survey of young people in Germany, JIM Study 2018, concluded that students of lower economic status spent 244 minutes online per day in 2018, while students from grammar schools, associated with higher social status, spent 197 minutes online daily (Feierabend et al. 2019). Another study conducted with schoolchildren in the Austrian region of Tyrol in 2017 drew similar conclusions: Children with a migrant background reported spending 12.8 hours a week and 15 hours at the weekend consuming media, compared to 9.5 hours and 10.8 hours, respectively, for children without a migrant background. Children from households with at least one parent with a university education spend the least amount of time online and the most hours on sporting activities (Kaiser-Jovy, Scheu, and Greier 2017).

What has once been a privilege (in terms of access) seems to be turning into potentially problematic "screen time" that needs to be regulated. How socially constructed the notion of "problematic" is became obvious during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, when the Austrian government introduced "social distancing" measures. While teachers I met during fieldwork reported how some schools had banned smartphones in class to avoid distraction, suddenly digital media became the only communication option, while online learning gained relevance overnight. As youth centers closed their doors, smartphones—former enemies, became their only connection to youths. Youth center staff came up with a number of creative ways to connect with youths online, such as creating simple baking videos, quizzes, and puzzles, and reading out stories on Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, and opening chat rooms on Discord (a platform often used by gamers to chat). Instead of being a symbol of social isolation, accused of leading to social loneliness, smartphones and the internet now became an acceptable tool against social isolation and boredom, a lifeline to the outside world.

The internet became replete with reports of boredom and the importance of endless online entertainment to people's mental health,

but also with reports of people wishing for a physical walk through buzzing commercial centers. The moment shopping malls reopened in Vienna after the initial closure, newspapers began reporting how people missed walking and browsing through stores. Both older people and teenagers in and around the malls emphasized that "shopping relieves boredom" (Kainrath 2020). Without access to theaters, movie theaters, bars, and travel, the more affluent strata of society now lived lives of limited opportunity; and a seemingly isolating, lavish scroll through an Instagram feed became a welcome (and only) distraction, the only way to participate in the social hubbub other than a trip to the supermarket. As the world turned upside down, scrolling through the endless stream of content on YouTube or binge-watching shows on Netflix became an accepted pastime. Facebook quickly responded with a new feature—watching videos on Facebook became officially social, as some live videos included the option to host a "viewing party" with Facebook friends. With COVID-19 looming over isolated populations, the internet returned to what it once seemed—an intimate and socially affirming relief against distance, rather than a cause of the "death of proximity" (Miller et al. 2021). For affluent populations, changing circumstances brought to light how vital diverse and accessible opportunities for digital connection were and are; circumstances that are not temporary for those with limited resources to participate in social and commercialized spaces; circumstances that remained limited even after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet, despite the now-ubiquitous experience of all-encompassing, long-term boredom due to the pandemic, shared experience across socioeconomic differences had a limit. From the reports of local youth institutions and media (e.g., red 2020b) and informal conversations with youth center staff, it was clear that disadvantaged youth were in a particularly precarious situation—whether in terms of leisure or school. Public parks and shopping centers or even youth centers, places that were otherwise available to hang out in without financial means or the pressure to consume, were now out of reach for months. What remained was confinement in small apartments for some families, which was especially problematic when domestic violence occurred. Previously, escaping to the youth center or a park could be an avoidance strategy—safe spaces that were now unavailable, leaving online spaces as the only refuge for some. Others, meanwhile, accumulated large fines while hanging out in parks despite the lockdown (red 2020b). More than ever, the pandemic brought to the fore the importance of physical, accessible spaces to hang out in. These are especially important in densely populated areas that are sometimes uninviting to youths who lack privacy at home or who are excluded from structured recreational or consumer activities.

The digital divide in its fundamental, narrow meaning became more apparent than ever during the pandemic. Teachers were suddenly unable to reach many of the students, some of whom did not own a computer or use an email address. Even when a computer was available in the home, the device (and a desk or workstation) had to be shared with siblings, sometimes in shifts (Goldenberg and Wittstock 2020). While parental involvement in homeschooling is challenging under any circumstances, homeschooling difficulties could understandably increase if absent parents worked as essential workers, had difficulty with the German language, or had insufficient educational backgrounds to help with schooling. After a closure lasting several weeks, calls emerged in the media to provide digital devices for those young people who did not have computers at home. When the city of Vienna offered free laptops for temporary use after some time, media reports indicated that few were actually distributed, even one year into the pandemic (red 2020a). As elsewhere, the pandemic painfully revealed the vulnerabilities of unequal societies around the world. In addition, the importance of available spaces to hang out, access to green space, and the relevance of social media for social participation and leisure emerged. During the pandemic, one youth center shared several of my questions with their followers on Instagram. One was a question about coping mechanisms for social isolation. A few children and young people mentioned talking to friends and classmates via WhatsApp groups or playing PlayStation with friends in "party mode"—activities that played a significant role in their lives anyway. But that did not mean that nothing had changed. As one participant in the online codesign workshops held during the lockdown noted, "It's not the same, of course, especially in relation to events that are unique—you only turn sixteen once in your life." The enforced absence of alternative leisure activities among the more privileged segments of the population shed a different light on productive engagement with digital media technologies. It can hardly convince anyone that not having a choice in where and how one meets and socializes is ideal. And even then, young people did not have the illusion that media consumption due to a lack of alternatives was better than celebrating birthdays with friends. In a study conducted in forty-two countries with 4,200 children aged between nine and thirteen in spring 2020, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most common response (86 percent) from children, when asked when they use media was still "When I'm bored" (Götz and Lemish 2022).

During the pandemic, public discourses seem to have redefined what it means to be "productive" and "active"—at least temporarily. On the one hand, productivity at home was a highly relevant concern dur-

ing the lockdown, with popular magazines offering tips on how to be more productive at home (Asshauer 2020; Collins 2020) and studies measuring the productivity of a home office compared with more easily monitored office spaces (e.g., Bloom et al. 2020; Landes et al. 2020). Nevertheless, calls not to submit to the pressure to be productive began amid the adoption of remote work in many organizations, with the explosion of new online courses and events, and amid the general anxiety associated with navigating difficult times or the dangers of "toxic productivity" (e.g., Smith 2020; Wong 2021). Suddenly, it was considered socially acceptable not to be active and efficient online, once this lack of productivity was divorced from its association with the young, bored, and potentially troubled and out of control. As with how meditating is considered an efficient and self-actualizing way of "doing nothing"—a productive way of dealing with boredom (Danckert and Eastwood 2020) in line with digital detox advocates—passive consumption of digital content became a legitimate way to survive the lack of social participation and boredom among the privileged. Once "doing nothing" becomes an enforced circumstance rather than a matter of choice and privilege, arguments about the alleged corrupting effects of digital technologies seem forgotten for a while. Unstructured time and boredom also become another annoyance rather than a source of potential problems. But, for some, young people still seem exempt. For Klaus Zierer, a prominent German professor of education, students were in danger of getting used to "doing nothing" by sitting in front of the *Glotze* (a derogatory term for the TV, rooted in *glotzen*, a verb that means *to stare* in German) during the lockdown—a state that would lead to an "educational catastrophe," as Zierer describes in his essay for the newspaper *Der Spiegel* (Zierer 2021). Such framings miss the deeper context of young people's reality during lockdown—complex experiences often marked by frustration, hardship, and constrained opportunities rather than passivity and ignorance.

Productive Time

The Perception of Time

The widespread sense of guilt and concern expressed by my interlocutors regarding "wasting time" raises the question of how time is perceived and classified in a broader cultural and historical context. Although somewhat neglected, time has historically been an anthropological concern (see Bear 2014; Bourdieu 1964; Evans-Pritchard 1940; Fabian [1983] 2014; Geertz 1966; Munn 1992;). In fact, as Johannes

Fabian ([1983] 2014) prominently argued, by reproducing the discipline's inherent allochronism, anthropologists themselves were complicit in constructing ethnographic subjects as temporally distanced "others," thus denying them their contemporaneity.[1] In the context of communication technologies in Indonesia, Martin Slama and Jenny Munro (2015) observe how the notion of digital mastery and access to "real time" was used by affluent Javanese people to demonstrate modernity and distinguish themselves from Papuans, who were denied digital agency and, by contrast, assigned a "Stone Age" temporality. This, the authors argue, can be read as a continuation of the colonial legacy in which Dutch colonial officials asserted their authority as masters of technology, be it through gramophones or firearms (Rutherford 2012), in contrast to the "Stone Age" to which they assigned Papuans—something anthropologists reinforced by engaging in capturing their "primitiveness" on film (Slama and Munro 2015: 7–8). With the advent of new digital technologies and the recently more accessible Indonesian project of modernity, smartphones and laptops are increasingly becoming new status symbols that signify technological presence and participation in reality and the modernity implied in "real time" (2015: 30). It is hard to escape the impression that current discourses on digital literacy echo similar notions of digital mastery and productivity that enable "cybercitizens" to master their environment and real time and so become part of the globally shared spatiotemporal realm of modernity (3). In this book, however, the distinction I make is not so much between past and present, but rather between a "passive" existence in the present and a desire to rush into the future while developing a heightened sense of the inevitably fast-rolling, but ideally controlled, time.

Hence, at least from an anthropological perspective, it is hardly possible to isolate time from power. E. E. Evans-Pritchard's (1940) influential distinction between Western "abstract" clock time and the Nuer's task-oriented, natural rhythms set a foundation for later debates. Building on this, Edward P. Thompson's (1967) classic Marxist analysis showed how capitalist factory discipline imposed standardized, measured time, replacing task-based rhythms and intertwining time with class struggles. Although this dichotomy has been contested by scholars pointing out the simplistic West and non-West divisions of time perception or the lack of nuance and gender-related considerations in Thompson's analysis (Bear 2014; Gell [1992] 2021; Glennie and Thrift 1996; Ingold 2000; Munn 1992; Postill 2002; Sauter 2007; Swiniartzki 2020; Wajcman 2014), there is value in examining underlying power relationships and perceptions.

Although Judy Wajcman warns us to "move beyond a narrow focus on clocks as talismanic artifacts" (2014: 43), a brief historical look at

clocks in the Austrian context offers a useful insight into how such talismans can be instrumentalized to create dichotomies and social hierarchies. Erhard Chvojka (2002), an Austrian historian, examined how clocks were used by Vienna's urban elites from the sixteenth century onward to emphasize the backwardness of Austrian peasants. City dwellers pointed to the inability of villagers to grasp abstract time and instead follow the natural rhythms of their bodies, the sun, and the seasons, and highlighted their use of primitive technologies. These assumptions existed despite the evidence of clocks being introduced extensively by the end of the sixteenth century in (Protestant slightly earlier than Catholic) villages. Rural churches and schools followed precise clock time, while farmers were well aware of the time in their work as day laborers. Such projections, which deny a similar importance of clocks in the countryside and in the city, were deeply intertwined with ideals of natural and idyllic authenticity attributed to the countryside—a sentiment reinforced in later centuries when city dwellers romanticized the countryside as an exotic antithesis to hectic urban life. Biedermeier paintings that arose from these ideas, for example, often omitted clocks from church towers and farmhouses, despite their prevalence. Time and its artifacts are powerful tools for othering. So are ideas of how time is supposed to be organized.

Leaving aside problematic dichotomies and historical inaccuracies, Thompson's (1967) Marxist contribution is valuable in that it explores the connection between economic and technological changes and their relationship to personal experience of time (Gell [1992] 2021)—inside and outside of work. The fact that time began to be valued in financial terms and organized with fines, bells, and clocks, and was to be "spent" rather than "passed," also means that idle time generally became synonymous with the loss of money (Thompson 1967: 30). The negotiation of time between capitalists and workers in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries is linked to control over workers, whose leisure time, particularly their alcohol binges, feasts, and general time thrift, was increasingly problematized by both the church and capitalists, according to Thompson. To support the argument, Thompson cites authoritative British figures who complained about the idle time spent sitting on the bench and standing in groups on the side of the road, commenting on passersby. These activities were considered offensive because in a capitalist society, all time is to be consumed, and free time is to be used for mental cultivation rather than simply letting it pass. One such voice belonged to the Reverent J. Clayton, a native of Manchester, who wrote a *Friendly Advice to the Poor* in 1755, complaining about the "idle ragged children; who are not only losing their Time, but learning habits of

gaming." Those who spend their time only for the sake of gaming, idly loitering in marketplaces or at tea (which he calls a "shameful devourer of Time and Money"), at weddings and funerals, he reminded, have only poverty to look forward to as a reward. Such examples, Thompson argues, are symptomatic of the period in which working-class leisure came under sharp attack in the context of class supremacy and colonialism. Moreover, the institution of the school was idealized as a place of discipline, early rising, and punctuality and was seen by some as the appropriate institution to accustom poor children to work and fatigue (Thompson 1967: 33–36). Thompson's arguments hint at the role of power dynamics through time technologies. Anthropologists have long observed how colonial institutions began to affect local perceptions of time. Bambi Schieffelin, for example, documented how missionaries in Bosavi, a village in Papua New Guinea, introduced not only clocks, calendars, and radios but also daily activities "modeling a life that has no idle moments" (2002: 12). In her account, similar to the work of Slama and Munro (2015), colonial time regimes introduced not only new routines but also an ideological distinction between colonizers and others, between Stone Age and "modern" time.

As Marx, Thompson, and other scholars in the Marxist tradition have noted, the length of the workday—as time sold to the employer in an environment of unequal power relations—is intrinsically linked to the labor relations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Aronowitz and Roberts 2017), the eight-hour day being one of the significant achievements of labor unions. In Austria, the eight-hour day (six-day week) was introduced in 1918, and the five-day week in the 1970s. Despite economic growth, increasing automation, high unemployment, and growing calls for a four-day week, working hours have not only remained the same, but longer working hours have been legalized again. A reform by the conservative government in 2018, despite opposition from the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions, legalized and thus normalized the twelve-hour working day and the sixty-hour working week, which had previously been considered exceptional. According to the Austrian Chamber of Labor, a law that gives employers more power leaves room for exploitation. Although the decision to work longer hours must legally be left to the workers, indirect pressure could still be exerted, especially on workers who work in physically demanding and precarious conditions rather than in air-conditioned offices ("AK Standpunkt zum 12-Stunden-Tag-Gesetz" 2018). This extension and normalization of long working hours not only underscores ongoing struggles over labor conditions but also sets the stage for institutional efforts to discipline and regulate time in ways that shape workers' daily rhythms

and social realities—a dynamic vividly reflected in programs like Vienna's employment labs and apprenticeships that emphasize punctuality and "work virtues" as forms of moral and temporal training.

Strict Time Regimes

Employment Labs

As Laura Bear (2014) argues, the Marxist approach to time might have its flaws, yet it importantly highlights the hierarchies of time perceptions inherent in the power relations reinforced through institutions and dominant discourses. Anthropological work, according to Bear, can expand on this by pinpointing tensions and dilemmas in contradictory time-rhythms in the lived experience, rather than leaving it at the notion of abstract time that Marx and Thompson rely on (Bear 2014). Such dilemmas started to emerge in the ambivalence of guilty pleasure discussed in this chapter, of competing desires and disappointments when one fails to turn empty time into something vaguely productive. In Vienna, while working hours remain long for some, young people's unemployment is managed through measures designed to structure time, simulate work, and thus make them "fit for apprenticeships" (*AusbildungsFit*). Young people under the age of eighteen are expected to attend one of these schemes, if they leave school or cannot find an apprenticeship or a job, in order to receive benefits. These include the ÜBA (*Überbetriebliche Lehrausbildung*) and the employment labs described in chapter 1. Usually, after a trial week in an employment lab, young people are accepted on a state-funded apprenticeship for up to a year and paid for every day they arrive on time. Reliability and punctuality are among the "work virtues" (*Arbeitstugenden*) that are explicitly taught alongside specific skills. The German term *Arbeitstugenden* is rarely used in colloquial language and thus carries an aura of previous centuries. It also derives from the word *Tugend*, which has its origins in the philosophical and thus ethical understanding of virtue. The employment lab, with whom we collaborated on a project in which we codeveloped a mobile app for writing job applications, was part of this initiative.

The lab participants we interviewed had diverging views on the disciplining aspect of the lab. In general, they appreciated the opportunity to try different things, the supportive atmosphere, and especially the attention and kindness they received from the trainers and coaches in this particular lab—something not everyone was used to from their teachers. Some were not always sure what they were actually doing there: "To be honest, I don't know exactly what . . . I have . . . erm . . . actually, I really don't know what I was doing." Some were waiting for time to

pass, especially if they were already experienced in a particular area or did not understand the purpose of certain activities. Given the range of ages—from fifteen to nineteen—and the range of abilities, some sometimes felt underwhelmed:

> For me personally, however, the work itself was often difficult because I felt underchallenged, simply because the level here is different. And of course you can't cater to each individual person, I realize that. It's just stupid when I'm given a task, I finish it in twenty minutes, and the others need three hours, and I just sit there and think *hmm, yeah.*

Others acknowledged that the lab is not necessarily about learning particular skills, but about learning how to be an employee, about work virtues. This particular objective became palpable in the stress of the early mornings. On my way between the tram and the work lab, I would usually see lab participants hastily throwing away their cigarettes or holding a half-eaten sandwich in their hands as they ran to be on time. There were clear rules: If someone failed to turn up, they received a deduction from their monthly payment. Lateness was generally not tolerated unless it was excused by a timely phone call and a valid excuse. This strict time regime led to mixed reactions: "I like it, I would say. It's definitely something different, it's more of a working atmosphere. It's very strict from time to time, just like in real work as they try to portray it, which can be very brutal sometimes." This participant, who stated that she was underwhelmed, also emphasized that she is aware of the importance of other skills she has learned and how these have helped her cope with the unstructured time she experienced prior to her participation in the lab:

> It helps me because it's about the structure, it's about the principle of what you learn here, so not what you specifically learn . . . well, that too, of course that also helps, but more with the structure—getting up, coming here, being on time. Just . . . do what the boss tells you to do. Don't complain. Don't mess around. Also come back from breaks. Just stick to the rules. Get structure in your life. That's all right. That has already helped a lot. For me personally. Because I was lost during corona [the COVID-19 pandemic period] and school and stuff like that. Very lost.

As previously mentioned, this experience of feeling lost while waiting was common. Another participant, when asked about the time prior to joining the lab, also explicitly mentioned the lack of routines: "So that wasn't so good in any case, because I didn't have a daily routine, so to

speak. I got up late in the afternoon and went to sleep very late at night. I just didn't have a rhythm, and that meant I wasn't doing well." This is precisely the main argument on which such employment schemes are based. They offer just that—a daily structure, an incentive to get up in the morning, a framework in which nonattendance has consequences, in which absence is registered along with personal achievements. In contrast to "doing boredom" outside the program, the labs are at worst an opportunity to do boredom together. As the participants themselves noted, daily structure can indeed counterbalance the experiences of waiting and boredom that preceded the measure. The moment when this performance of busyness turns into "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) is when it implicitly promises not only to be "fit" for the labor market, but when it implies that there is an accessible labor market at all and that they will be rewarded for learning to embody work virtues. While they keep young people busy, for better or worse, the programs do not guarantee a placement or a job. One senior member of staff at a youth center called similar initiatives "cosmetic measures." Pointing to the pile of brochures scattered around the youth center bar, he explained:

> Look how many government-funded programs there are to employ them. Do you think that is a good sign, that the state has to provide so many things? On the surface it looks good. They go somewhere for weeks to have a weekly structure, but it doesn't solve anything because they're not really trained properly and there's no place to go after that. The problem remains—the market is not investing in these young people like it used to.

The rise in overall unemployment in Austria since the 1970s seems to confirm the underlying structural problems of restricted access to the labor market, which cannot be remedied with "cosmetic measures." After a low in the postwar years, the situation on the labor market improved to between 1 and 3 percent unemployment in the 1970s. This was followed by a steady rise in numbers, which stood at 10.3 percent for men and 8.8 percent for women in 2022 ("Arbeitslose, Arbeitssuchende" 2024), disproportionately affecting young people with lower formal education levels and migration backgrounds ("Arbeitsmarktdaten" 2024). It should not be overlooked that such programs, which superficially look like apprenticeships but do not deliver on their promise, can also conceal the actual unemployment figures.

There is certainly an element of performed busyness that only postpones unemployment, keeps participants from assumed boredom and trouble and extends the state's control over their lives under the age

of eighteen. The current high number of youth organizations and programs aimed at structuring the time of potentially bored young people dates back to the Red Vienna era, when subsidized all-day kindergartens and youth care centers were set up outside, but also within, larger social housing projects. Some of the housing projects built in the early twentieth century had recreation rooms for children, workshops, and large yards to "keep them off the streets," including supervision by an adult, for example, by a pensioner or "men of labor" who helped instill a "love of work" in the apprentices. City-funded youth care centers offered after-school "activities for keeping busy," including outings, swimming, and so on. These developments can be traced back to the emerging socialist concern with forming the working classes. Julius Tandler, an influential Austrian doctor and Social Democrat of the Red Vienna period, once remarked, "What we spend on after-school care, we save on prisons" (Bauer and Bauer 2024, my translation). There is a long history of structuring school and extracurricular activities in places like Vienna. Smartphones, so it seems, may bring disorder to this world of order.

It is hard to overlook the parallels between widespread moralist concerns about young men drinking, gambling, and standing idly on street corners in eighteenth-century England, or the elders' disdain for young people's tea parties, described as "a frivolous pastime serving no purpose" in Niger (Masquelier 2013: 472), or the unchecked youths hanging out in the internet cafés in Ghana (Burrell 2012), on the one hand, and concerns that the unregulated, unstructured, and seemingly purposeless time spent daydreaming and scrolling through social media feeds distracts from work, education, and "productive" forms of disciplined leisure, on the other hand. Interestingly, the origins of the English word *stroll* (first mentioned in 1603) lie in the Swiss-German word *Strolch*, which implies a *stroller* or a *vagabond* (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, n.d.), while *strolchen* means to roam, to travel aimlessly, to drift, and to wander (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Not yet the aristocratic pastime, strolling was reserved for wandering tramps in the seventeenth century. Strolling also seems to be associated with aimless wandering—especially problematic when the strollers are bored and unemployed youths "doing nothing." This idea finds a compelling echo in the concept of virtual arcades described in chapters 4 and 5—digital spaces where aimless scrolling and browsing mimic earlier forms of physical strolling or wandering through arcade halls filled with games and distractions. Just as arcades historically functioned as sites of leisure, temptation, and moral anxiety, the virtual arcades of social media blur boundaries between purposeful activity and drifting, work, and play. In this way, the act of digital strolling is not simply passive consumption but

an embodied movement through a liminal space charged with historical meaning and contemporary tensions around productivity, idleness, and social control.

Schools

Strict time regimes that order boredom and seemingly unproductive digital practices are not reserved for disadvantaged youths associated with boredom and trouble. Structured leisure opportunities for more privileged young people are also a way of ordering time. In her research on US youth and digital media, boyd (2014) found that middle- and upper-class parents tend to "overstructure" their children's time through an endless stream of after-school activities, ensuring that their children are not bored. For boyd, this is rooted in parents' fear that boredom will lead to deviance. She concludes:

> While parental restrictions and pressures are often well intended, they obliterate unstructured time and unintentionally position teen sociality as abnormal. This prompts teens to desperately—and, in some cases, sneakily—seek it out. As a result, many teens turn to what they see as the least common denominator: asynchronous social media, texting, and other mediated interactions. (2014: 89)

The optimized life of strict time regimes leaves little room for moments of unproductive leisure, thus leading to normalizing pressure that is to be expected later in the white-collar labor market. Some of the participants in the employment lab also came from prestigious schools, which usually lead toward gaining a high school diploma (the "Matura") and therefore higher education. They struggled with the pressure involved in attending a demanding school. As one participant commented: "It was hard; it was hard. . . . That's why I dropped out. I couldn't handle it. It was far too much pressure to perform and stress, and I just didn't want to do it anymore. I couldn't take it anymore." One of the lab instructors, when asked about the similarities between participants in government-funded employment courses, was emphatic in pointing out a problem that seems to cut across socioeconomic differences: "There are people who, for whatever reason, can't keep up with the fast pace of society and need a little breather to get back on track. I think we all have that in common."

Interestingly, while student performance is often measured and quantified by high-profile studies, such as the PISA study, there seems to be little data on the amount of time spent on school-related activities in Vienna or Austria in total—in contrast to endless studies about time spent

on social media. One of the rare finds I unearthed was a 2005 study that found that primary school pupils spend an average of thirty-seven hours per week on school, whereas "Mittelschule" pupils (who do not aspire to attend secondary school) spend forty-five hours, and pupils attending secondary schools and intending to enroll in higher education spend between fifty-one and fifty-five hours per week on school and homework (Eder 2007). These figures, which in the latter cases exceed an average working week in Austria, are not mentioned in current studies on the school system in Austria. Yet, in the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) study by the Ministry of Health, the authors do note that there is evidence that the pressure reported by pupils has increased since 2014, while they also emphasize that the mental health of young people in general has declined. For example, in the 2018 and 2021–2022 studies, the authors reported that more than half the students attending secondary school reported feeling very or extremely pressurized by school activities—a pressure that increases with the higher grades. For apprentices (who receive basic schooling parallel to their apprenticeships), this pressure is mainly related to physical aspects such as standing for long periods, heavy lifting, noise, or time pressure. The authors concede that the relationship between pressure to perform and mental health has received little attention to date, but they do not mention the amount of time spent on school-related activities (Felder-Puig, Teufl, and Winkler 2024).

Of course, we cannot simply assume that the sheer number of hours spent at school means that this time leads to pressure. Furthermore, the situation is complicated by the argument that longer school hours could lead to increased social mobility as the school takes the pressure off parents who can also work longer hours. The education system in Austria has a long history of all-day schools (*Ganztagsschulen*) offering an afternoon program with homework and sports activities. Nevertheless, it is important to consider these factors when trying to understand how technology fits into the lives of young people who are juggling various pressures they are exposed to from an early age. Unfortunately, these invisible issues rarely make it into the news, unlike the countless studies of smartphones, social media, and mental health that are widely reported. The features and conditions of apprenticeships or students working borderline illegal hours seem less spectacular than beauty filters and TikTok videos when examining the well-being of young people.

Youth Centers

Youth centers, too, are affected by the increased structuring of leisure time. Staff reported that they have become quieter in recent years.

Marco, a twenty-two-year-old former regular and avid gamer, talked nostalgically about the old days. He recalled the days when the youth centers were full of life, especially on weekends, when parties were held regularly. Tim, his twenty-five-year-old friend and also a gamer, confirmed this, blaming gaming and social media for fewer visitors and parties. Some staff also blamed smartphones and gaming for these changes. But Hammed, a seventeen-year-old young man who flies model airplanes at an outdoor airfield—a hobby he shares with people who are generally much older than he is—disagreed. When I asked him what he thought about the role of social media and gaming, he remarked, "I hear that a lot at the airfield from older people, that there used to be more younger people and now, because of the internet, there are fewer."

"So, is that true?" I asked. "I use the internet too, don't I? So, does that keep me away from the airfield?" On the contrary, YouTube videos brought Hammed closer to his hobby. He regularly watched videos of other aviators and, with the help of these tutorials, learned to build the planes himself.

A senior youth center employee agreed that the youth centers have changed. His explanations, however, pointed to more significant changes:

> We used to talk more about politics, do more educational work, but they don't want that. They're tired from work and long hours at school. They just want to come here and relax. But they are not allowed to drink, and recently they are also forbidden to smoke near the youth center. No wonder, if I were young, I wouldn't come here either.

Faced with the everyday pressures of work and school, the youth center becomes another site of rules and time regimes, albeit less strictly than in schools or employment labs. Yet, as Pyyry and Tani (2019) note, having "loose" places to hang out, improvise, have spontaneous encounters, and enjoy being unproductive is essential for engaging with the world. In boyd's (2014) research with US adolescents, public spaces are now less frequented by adolescents not only because of the emergence of social media; rather, the popularity of social media is related to the fact that public spaces are increasingly inaccessible to adolescents, and parental concerns with safety limit their mobility. As another senior staff member noted, attendance at Viennese youth centers has also declined because of parental restrictions: "I think it might be because kids can't stay out as late. They also increasingly have to stay late in school in the afternoons, and the young people who used to be unemployed and hang out here are now involved in employment schemes." Luke, a staff member in his thirties, added:

> Remi had to leave at eight o'clock today, he told me. His mother insists on it as a form of prevention; she does not want him to start smoking or causing trouble. Now it seems cool not to make an excuse for why you have to go home early, as was the case when I was there. They don't seem ashamed of it. They are pretty open about it. He showed me a note from his mom. It read "Remi is going home," and then she added a running emoji.

Many of the young people I encountered in employment labs, in schools, or waiting out unemployment had one thing in common—they had negotiated external time regimes, whether self-imposed through societal pressure or imposed by state institutions or parents, with the aim of keeping them busy and out of trouble.

There is an important factor in the way time is "spent" that should not be overlooked—control over one's time is also a matter of financial privilege. In her book *Pressed for Time*, Wajcman (2014) shows that speed and mobility have always been a privilege of the cosmopolitan urban elite and the middle class, who are overrepresented in narratives about acceleration and time pressure. According to Wajcman, sociological surveys in countries such as the United States show that the gap is widening between those who work very long hours in prestigious jobs, usually in the upper echelons of management, and those who struggle to find work or who work part-time. As privileged groups tend to be more present in public debates, the narrative of "acceleration," that is, the perception that time is passing faster and faster, is also more present. As Wajcman also emphasizes, the rhetoric of speed that surrounds new technological devices glorifies efficiency and busyness. These devices therefore correspond to social ideals associated with high status: busyness as a "badge of honour" (2014: 97), both at work and at leisure. At the same time, time moves more slowly for young people who grapple with unemployment, rejection, and exclusion from economic participation; perhaps even slower because of the contrast with the seemingly fast-paced world of ever-changing consumer goods. Having too much time without structure or employment can clearly be devastating for young people lost in the transition phase, as can engaging in boredom-instilling jobs or keeping them busy in endless employment courses. Yet, placing school students under enormous pressures with a life devoid of loose time can obviously negatively affect students too. This is not a plea for either way, but a pointer toward the importance of considering such external (time) pressures imposed on young people before restricting the time and activities they *do* have some control over. Most importantly, placing blame on individuals for their lack of

self-control is misplaced when most of their lives are painfully beyond their control.

Conclusion

The young people I encountered needed to negotiate between, on the one hand, the broader narratives of unproductive time that historically instilled guilt in those who failed to engage in self-discipline and mental cultivation in their leisure time, and, on the other hand, the design of digital media technologies created precisely for unproductive leisure time. Here, the abstract expectations of appropriate time regimes are entangled with the materiality of leisure technologies. After all, as Laura Bear argues, temporalizing practices that manifest abstract time regimes also entail encounters with the material world (2014: 20) or, in this case, the pulsating surfaces of smartphone screens. These spaces are meant for "purposefully" doing nothing, hanging out, strolling through the village, exchanging gossip, flirting with potential partners in passing, or simply counting sheep. The sticky screens are playful and pulsating (and often unmonitored) invitations to linger, to spend attention, time, and perhaps money in commercialized spaces. At the same time, smartphones are a link to the constant noise of the world, everyday companions that do not distinguish between work and leisure, information and communication, fake news and social gossip, storytelling, and conspiracy theories. The fact that digital environments expand the sphere of the social and pave the way for accessible and effortless codwelling was never more evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic, when temporary lockdowns deprived wealthier populations of many ways of dispelling boredom—restrictions that are not that temporary for many of the young people I encountered. The assumption that empowerment and productivity should be the purpose of online practices glosses over the design logic of such spaces. Discourses that focus solely on (productive) screen time might reduce a plethora of activities, care rituals, and circumstances to a one-dimensional view of the mechanical interface, or even overlook all the moments when smartphones are set aside when there are exciting tasks to accomplish. Advice to young people on what time well spent should look like should also consider the time spent under strict time regimes and the pressures and disappointed promises linked to this structuring of time. Perhaps these questions should be worth our attention at least as much as monitoring and "cleaning up" their free time at the expense of loose time in digital and physical environments. In the next chapter, I turn my attention from time to space.

Note

1. Despite subsequent paradigm shifts in anthropology, scholars such as Çağlar (2016), Glick Schiller (2018), and Ramsay (2020) emphasize that current anthropological works reproduce similar binaries in their work with migrants and refugees, freezing them in an exceptional state of permanent crisis and dispossession while positioning themselves in the interdetermined present (Ramsay 2020: 403).

CHAPTER 7

(Un)desirable Flâneurs

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020, the clip-clopping of horses carrying romantic carriages through the elaborate streets of Vienna's first (central) district—streets lined with pompous late nineteenth-century architecture—went eerily quiet for several months. Tourists disappeared virtually overnight, and the souvenir stores, filled with unsold cups featuring Sisi and Klimt decor, remained closed. The quiet scenes were in stark contrast to the otherwise bustling high-end streets arranged in a maze around St. Stephen's Cathedral, filled with groups of tourists wandering in and out of Gucci stores and traditional coffee shops, and smartly dressed professionals taking a lunch break. Vienna's first district belongs mainly to these wanderers, who had by now temporarily left the inner city, leaving the large, glistening glass windows of the Swarovski shops shining into the empty, dark streets. In the spring of 2021, the first district slowly came back to life. Suddenly, the square around the cathedral, usually populated by a row of fake Mozarts selling tickets to overpriced concerts, became the scene of unusual events—young people, many of them with migrant backgrounds and from the urban periphery, began to gather and play football in the large square around the cathedral. Several videos of young men kicking the ball went viral on social media. The scenes had an almost provocative effect on local residents, who were not used to groups of young men from the periphery now reclaiming the highly visible space around the heart of the city, and certainly on the police, who began fining them for gathering in public spaces during the lockdown (Hoisl 2021).

Troubled Youths

The city center, usually populated by tourists and white-collar professionals, did not seem very inviting to the youth center visitors, who reported that they stayed mainly in their own areas and avoided the inner districts. The city of Vienna is shaped like an onion, with St. Stephen's Cathedral at its core. The shiny first district is surrounded by a circle of inner districts, mostly containing higher-priced apartments. These districts are marked by an imaginary line beyond which factories sprang up during industrialization, and the working class began to settle on the periphery. Although all the districts are permeated by social housing projects, sometimes located in the middle of higher-priced inner districts, thereby blurring the distinction, this imaginary line of the working class still exists. On my first day at one of the youth centers, its director greeted me in a back office with a large window. "Beyond this street," he said, pointing to a noisy street that passes next to the youth center, "begins the historic working-class neighborhood. We are just a few feet inside the inner line." Many of the youth reported staying in their neighborhoods and rarely venturing outside. Mehmut, for example, an occasional visitor and asylum seeker, was aware that he did not fit into the first district. Once, while we sat on the sofas, he announced that he was moving to the first district. Grinning, he carefully observed the reaction of his mates and staff gathered around the sofas. "What?" he said. "You don't believe me? You think just because I'm a foreigner I can't live in the first district? But it's true." He then explained that his family got an apartment in centrally located social housing and pays "only €480" in rent. For others, like Hammed, the first district was too "turbulent," compared with the peripheral district he enjoyed living in. When I asked him if he witnessed fighting and drugs while growing up, as one of his peers had described it earlier, Hammed replied: "Just a normal amount. Other districts like Floridsdorf [another peripheral district] are worse. I think this is just a stereotype especially among younger kids." Timo, aged fifteen, had just moved to the (same) district a year ago and was already feeling at home: "It's much better than in Floridsdorf. There, everyone was at home, playgrounds were empty. Here, a lot of people are outside, in the parks." Attitudes toward one's own district varied, but they were usually permeated with a sense of belonging and distinction from "others."

Although the mixing of social housing and higher-priced housing is not uncommon, in recent years the separation between lower-priced and higher-priced housing has begun to increase, with a greater tendency to cluster in certain districts or areas (Mory 2021), while the rate

of building new subsidized housing has decreased (Putschögl 2020) and the prices of real estate exploded after the 2008 financial crisis (Karasz 2018). Yet, even with spatial proximity, the historically entrenched distinction between youths from different housing developments remains. Once, the youth center received a visit from a photographer in his early to mid-thirties, who was doing a project at the center. During his break, I asked him if he had been to the youth centers when growing up:

> When I was young, I knew about them, but I didn't go there. Although we lived maybe five hundred meters from the social housing, it was clear—here we have the condominiums and cooperatives (*Eigentums- und Genossenschaftswohnungen*), and there is the social housing. It was clear that you stay in your area (*Grätzl*) and you don't mix.

The limited mixing of social classes was evident in both youth centers, with the vast majority of youth living in nearby social housing. This was even more obvious in the second youth center, which was located on the city's outskirts, far beyond the invisible border separating the outer districts from the city center. When I rode my bicycle to the youth centers, I usually rode through the inner districts, across the Danube, and deep into what the Viennese call "Transdanubia," a distant land within the city, which most inner-city residents rarely ventured into. The path took me beyond the promenades and bathing spots along the Danube and along streets that crisscross and pass through suburban areas and large shopping malls. Finally, an hour later, I passed a large park and playground and saw the outline of an impressive social housing project on the horizon. Nearby, a huge shopping center with a McDonald's sign would come into view, looming large over other buildings. At times, I would see some of the young people I knew heading there—after all, with free Wi-Fi and cheap food, McDonald's was a popular place to hang out. While the area did include large buildings, it felt spacious; the buildings stood out against the open horizon, a rare sight in the densely built-up downtown area.

Aside from youth centers, many youths hang out in yards within the apartment blocks, shopping centers, and local parks, not always without friction with janitors, security guards, and police, who are often especially wary of groups of young immigrant men. In her ethnography in Viennese parks, Mayer also describes frictions between youths and neighbors, for instance in so-called *Wohnstrassen* (traffic-free streets), where the neighbors wished for the cars to come back because youths brought more troubles than cars (2011: 105). For some youths, hanging out outdoors is not always optional. As one staff member noted, "These

kids who come from the former Yugoslavia or Turkey, their parents don't want them hanging out at home all day. They send them out, and they come here [the youth center] because they have nowhere to go." This is certainly the case for those living in shared government-funded apartments for homeless youth. The young residents must leave their room at 10 a.m. and not return until the evening but prior to the curfew. For some, the youth centers are places not only to hang out but also to shelter from the elements. One staff member from the suburban youth center emphasized this, saying, "Sometimes in the summer, when we have a two-week summer break, and the youth centers are closed, they ride the bus in endless loops because there is air conditioning." As urban planners increasingly tend to "plan out" free-roaming youth from the cityscape and isolate them in specially designated areas (such as "cages" in Vienna, that is, fenced areas in parks designated for football or basketball play), "loose" spaces for youth to hang out in without being monitored are becoming increasingly rare (Pyyry and Tani 2019: 1224; Staeheli and Mitchell 2008). Although youth centers themselves are fairly available and welcoming places for leisure, they are still somewhat supervised, regulated spaces with external time regimes and specific rules. Nonetheless, they are also a kind of compromise—visitors can hang out without parental control, but they must also abide by the rules and avoid trouble, alcohol, and smoking (at least inside and directly outside the door, although smoking cigarettes around the corner is tolerated).

The young, potentially bored and unproductive flâneur in the regulated urban landscape differs from the flâneur described by Charles Baudelaire in nineteenth-century Paris and discussed by Walter Benjamin. Their construct of the flâneur described the modern, urban, middle-class man who strolls and observes people on the streets from a certain distance (J. Wolff 1985). As Kerry Mallan summarizes it, "The *flâneur* would move, watch, and record his observations of the everyday activities of the working classes and the poor, the prostitutes, beggars, street children, soldiers, and police, and report back to a less adventurous bourgeois readership with a poetic journalism" (2012: 2).[1] The moment flâneurs become bored young men hanging out in the yards of social housing or strolling through the nearby shopping malls, the romantic, well-dressed figures transform into a potentially dangerous mass wasting valuable time, as the moralists cited in Edward P. Thompson (1967) lamented. Shopping malls are clean, safe spaces where flâneurism must be perfected, if young people are "not to be targeted by security guards," that is, they must adhere to "bourgeois norms and social docility in dress and action," as Matthews et al. note in their arti-

cle titled "The Unacceptable Flaneur" (2000: 293), based on a sociological study of several British shopping malls. Similar observations were made by Mayer, who describes how Viennese "park youths" struggled to conform to (and finance) expectations in terms of clothing and conduct once they engaged in urban pastimes like clubbing or shopping and were on the radar of malls' security staff. The youths could either adapt to the rules of consumption and enjoy the "ambivalent blessing of a guarded space" or be thrown out if they failed to conform or used the space for noncommercial activities (Mayer 2011: 110). As Noora Pyyry frames it:

> Certain ways of being are welcomed while others are framed as deviant, and multiple methods from surveillance and eviction to urban design are used in order to keep unwanted people out of these "public" spaces. . . . The mall offers its customers a controlled and safe space that appears to be public and inviting, but it is not that for all people. (2016: 11)

Such privately owned commercial spaces may appear public at first glance, but they are intentionally designed to accommodate the "desired" public by employing private surveillance measures that exclude deviant behaviors and protect seamless consumption (Voyce 2006). In this context, hanging out, rather than engaging in expected patterns of consumption, turns "deviant" groups into "unacceptable flâneurs," even in previously accessible spaces.

In Vienna, working-class flâneurs loitering on street corners and in social housing have historically been associated with boredom, unproductive leisure, and potential trouble since the Industrial Revolution. The 1950s and 1960s, for instance, saw renewed criminalization of working-class youths in the city, who became known as *Halbstarke* (half-strong ones). The term initially appeared in German-speaking countries in the early twentieth century, when they were described in the contemporary literature as young boys with greasy hats and pale faces (Farin 2010). In 1912, for example, the German pastor Clemens Schulz described the Halbstarke as enemies of order, beauty, and—above all—work. According to Schulz, they showed apathy toward the ideals of art, science, and religion, and everything beautiful and orderly aroused aggression in them (Farin 2010). In the 1950s and 1960s, riots in several cities in Europe revived the term *Halbstarke*. According to Werner Lindner (1996: 33), the riots were caused by local rivalries between gangs, provocations against the police, a desire for publicity, and boredom (33). In Vienna, the word *Halbstarke* reappeared as a label for youths who stood on street corners. Also known as *Schlurfs*, they were associated

with the social housing built in the aftermath of World War I to tackle rapid urbanization and the associated housing shortage. The mostly male working-class apprentices, aged fourteen to twenty, were conspicuous for dressing inappropriately by the standards of the time, dancing, listening to rock 'n' roll music on gramophones, and being known to occasionally get into street fights (Wächter 2006). The dancing, deviant youths who frequented public spaces were often equated with criminal gangs by the police, and their activities were sometimes criminalized. For example, it was reported that the police arrested dancing youths on several occasions in order to "make an example" (Grobner 2019). In the 1957 article by *Der Stern* reporter Harry Weber, a seventeen-year-old girl named Gitta is quoted as wondering why dancing was a crime in the eyes of the police. The article goes on to describe that young people danced under the bridge because there was no room at home and they were too young to visit dance clubs (Grobner 2019). According to sociologist Natalia Wächter, the postwar generation protested the fact that they were required to do physical labor and shoulder adult responsibilities while still being treated as submissive minors at home. Moreover, seeking the esteem they lacked at home, they were more likely to engage in consumerist activities compared with middle-class youths (2006: 91). Today, social housing blocks are still associated with immigrants, low-income families, and young working-class apprentices who hang out in nearby parks and malls. Today's Halbstarke may look and dress differently, but some of the main problems remain. Except that gramophones have been replaced by smartphones and Spotify,[2] and concerns about the troubling potential of "doing nothing" have found their way into the way we frame the digital divide and what ought to be done online. Rather than marking a radical rupture, contemporary anxieties about youths "doing nothing" online are woven into a much longer history of social concerns and moral panics, refashioned for the digital age.

Desirable Flâneurs and Digital Arcades

In contrast to public urban spaces, commercialized online spaces benefit from the presence of precisely those flâneurs who have time on their hands, want to hang out, and are able to make microinvestments of money and attention at any time of day, in whatever clothes they want to wear, with whatever music they want to listen to, as long as they can tolerate the advertising that is mixed in. This is true today, as it was in Mayer's (2011) study of Viennese park youths hanging out in internet cafés,

the latter having now mostly disappeared from the Viennese cityscape. In contrast to youth centers with their limited opening times and institutional rules, or to the shopping malls, internet cafés were open until late and almost free of control (Mayer 2011: 151). Today, smartphones have taken the place of internet cafés, and online spaces are more effortless, mobile, and available than ever. Inexpensive smartphones are either within reach or passed around by family members, and Wi-Fi access is free in public areas. They help circumvent both parenting guidelines that extend into leisure time and parental scrutiny and control. Moreover, commercialized online spaces provide a parent-free zone when space at home is cramped or uninviting, or when it is too cold or hot to meet friends at the park. It is an alternative space in which young people can roam freely as they wish. Once digital flâneurs surround themselves with an army of friends through a private account, or avoid contested public platforms like YouTube, then being seen as a foreigner, or seeking work or asylum, hardly matters. It matters less that one has fewer financial resources to participate in online activities, and young men and foreigners usually do not attract police attention by their mere presence. Here, the undesirable urban flâneurs become desirable online flâneurs who are welcome to hang out, inscribe their initials and uncensored graffiti on digital walls, and leave their attention and data traces behind. Their "street life" moves onto a digital street, as Jeffrey Lane (2018) demonstrates in his ethnography with Harlem youth.

Although there is some pressure (in the form of various nudges) to consume, simply hanging out online, scrolling, swiping, and playing, is good enough to generate profit. This is where designers and users meet in the effortless middle ground of doing nothing, doing nonsense, and daydreaming. The enticing, vibrant screens build on the same "dreamscapes" that once took hold in late nineteenth-century department stores. According to Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren, so-called dreamscapes have long been integrated into the architecture of consumption. Early department stores created downright intoxicating atmospheres, using techniques "from the stage to create a scene for consumer dreams" (2010: 161). These spaces, where one could wander and lose oneself, were immersed in sounds, smells, and colors and "a luminous spacious structure, a wellorganized experiencescape" (161). The authors also reference Erik Ottoson's (2008) study, which argues that such spaces create "dreamlike conditions of people drifting between counters and special offers, searching for something, but actually just spending time there" and fantasizing about merchandise. Ehn and Löfgren's conclusions, as well as Ottoson's, fit the parallel between strolling through early arcades and scrolling online through commercialized feeds. Similarly,

scrolling does not necessarily represent a search for something specific but signals drifting through constantly updated content and endless feeds. Much like supermarkets that direct customers' attention by placing the more expensive items at eye level and the cheaper items on the lower shelves, commercial online spaces dynamically adjust digital shelves based on who is looking at them.

The emergence of the shiny consumer spaces of the nineteenth century, however, where dreamscapes could encourage the masses to wander within enclosed, choreographed spaces, also brought unexpected effects. For some, it meant increasing freedom rather than introducing consumerist addictions. In the early twentieth century, for example, temples of consumption also allowed housewives to stroll and engage with a public space—all while attending to household duties (Ehn and Löfgren 2010: 161). Similar effects were observed in an early Viennese department store in the nineteenth century. In an 1899 brochure, the large, diverse product range of bustling department stores, with constantly arriving samples of textiles and household items, was meant to encourage *bummeln*, a German word that means strolling and passing the time. Women, it was described, came, strolled, and spent time with their friends without necessarily wanting to buy anything, but, as the pamphlet's authors noted with satisfaction, they rarely left the store without buying something (Breuss 2020). These new department stores spread out merchandise for people to touch and experience without the mediation of staff behind the counter. The idea of browsing took hold in a novel way, relying on the aesthetics of the entire dreamlike experience. Yet, the enclosed, choreographed space also brought freedom of movement for a housewife who could legitimately transform herself into a flâneuse, otherwise invisible and unacceptable in the public space of male flâneurs (Wolff 1985), now under the guise of housework duties (Breuss 2020).

As shown in this work, online spaces are not by default safe and empowering for girls, free from surveillance and danger. They can, however, provide privacy and playful experimentation with gender norms—as Rabi, the gamer girl (see chapter 2), demonstrated—beyond the private spaces of girls' restrooms. The presence of powerful global actors only adds to the negotiation of inclusion and exclusion that is already taking place. The human geographer Doreen Massey, for instance, acknowledges the potentially problematic dimensions of the privatization of public spaces in the neoliberal city, often exemplified by enclosed shopping malls. Yet, she also warns that noncommercial public spaces are romanticized as empty, free, and equal, while they are, in fact, always a result of social relations and "most likely conflicting and unequal," a result of power struggles and social dynamics, regardless of the pres-

ence or absence of commercial actors (2005: 152). Massey states, "Such 'public' space, unregulated, leaves a heterogeneous urban population to work out for itself who really is going to have the right to be there" (152). Often, those who lose out, with or without commercial actors, are the weaker and less mobile groups, as Mayer also demonstrates in her work on Viennese parks, in which established residents and new arrivals fought for their right to dominate parks and inhabit "cages" (2011: 62).

Going online does not mark a shift from discipline to freedom, as online and offline spaces still overlap: Going online is tantamount to entering hypersocial spaces, with all the conflicts, surveillance, and politics they entail. For minorities, especially, freely accessible online spaces, as we have seen, are a high-stakes environment, potentially populated by haters and trolls. Going online also means entering an arena that is monitored not only by corporations but, more importantly for my interlocutors, by friends and family. Often, digital literacy efforts include privacy modules that teach young people to be mindful of the traces they leave online. But, at the same time, the people who violate privacy online are often parents themselves. In one of the serious-game codesign workshops, we talked about Snap Map, a feature that allowed Snapchat users to share their approximate location with other users by displaying their avatar on a public map—a controversial feature for obvious reasons given its popularity among minors. The one student who did use it, however, did so for his mother's sake: "I use it so my mom won't have a heart attack if I'm a little late. Now she always knows where I am." While some reported negotiating tolerant rules for watching series on the video-streaming platform Netflix or the number of hours of gaming, some mentioned that their parents regularly checked their private messages. Gregor, a sixteen-year-old gamer who admitted to spending most of his free time playing video games, benefited from more lenient oversight: "They don't really care as long as I pass my classes at school. They watch TV until late themselves." Aida could also be online as long as she wanted, as long as she did not wake up her parents. At the other end of the spectrum, some parents read their children's private messages well into adolescence. Among them was the staff member Annika:

> Ever since my kids got a cell phone, I've been looking in there. Not necessarily because I don't trust them, but because I want to teach them about decency. For example, if someone makes fun of someone else in the WhatsApp group chat, I tell her it's not okay to support that.

The youths also have their own strategies to circumvent parental control. For example, Nabi explained that she started using Snapchat for

private messages instead of WhatsApp because those messages disappear after twenty-four hours. This reduced the risk of getting into trouble because her mother (who demanded to have her passwords) could not scroll through older messages and use them against her as she had done in the past.

However controversial and policed they may be, smartphones enable pockets of privacy and convenience, despite abstract talk of corporate privacy violations. While this may be a concern particularly relevant to urban and political elites, for the less affluent users who might live in crowded homes, or for those negotiating conservative spaces and familial surveillance, smartphones can be a way to escape the gaze of family, to daydream oneself away, or to avoid shame and embarrassment and circumvent cultural expectations when exploring romantic relationships online, as Martin Slama (2010) notes in his research on Indonesian youths' practices in chat rooms. Especially for unmarried young women, the author notes, anonymous online spaces offered some leeway for exploring agency by "pouring out one's heart" (*curhat*) and safely exploring alternatives to emotional constraint and shyness. Daniel Miller and colleagues (2021) have pointed to the situatedness of privacy discourses, arguing that for most in Europe and the United States, privacy is enmeshed in neoliberal ideology, which positions the individuals at the center of human rights, and as naturalized owners of information about them. In contrast, in the context of socialist ideologies, the state may see itself as responsible for enhancing social welfare through the ownership of information about individuals (Miller et al. 2021: 245–46). The work presented here, however, highlights the nuances in the European context itself, where privacy in terms of individual rights to protect personal information from the tech industry might not be a relevant concern for those whose mistrust is directed toward state institutions. This mistrust goes beyond the abstract, ideological mistrust against the governmental collection of data. Instead, it is rooted in youths' everyday experiences with the police, the employment office, potential employers, schools, and janitors regulating urban spaces. While smartphones may absorb the data of those who have few alternatives to be elsewhere, they also provide another arena in which privacy and freedom of movement can be individually renegotiated, depending on one's personal definition of privacy, priorities, and wider normative expectations (Willson and Kinder-Kurlanda 2021). An arena that sees them as desirable flâneurs regardless of class, free to move and roam. An arena that can dynamically adjust the McDonald's or Swarovski ads that are displayed, depending on who is watching, unlike the unwelcoming high streets of inner districts.

Contrasting undesirable and desirable ways of being a flâneur has not been an exercise in constructing absolute, fixed dichotomies that position idealized and welcoming online spaces against unfriendly urban landscapes. It is an attenuated, placative description that aims to ground the effortless "spell" of digital practices and commercial online spaces not in opposition to physical modes of hanging out but as intimately connected to them, subject to overlapping and complementing negotiations and exclusions.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have aimed to address larger questions of space, social actors, and agency. Inspired by the research of spatial theorists and human geographers, I expanded on the idea of the everyday, effortless agency of youths enmeshed with the design of the in-between; youths who are neither victims of abstract corporate agendas nor romantic rebels and political activists resisting the nonevents of everyday life in digital environments. I argue that young, bored, and unemployed youths, in particular, find themselves undesirable flâneurs in regulated, monitored urban spaces. I contrast these frictions with online spaces designed to facilitate effortless sociality and privacy on their own terms and encourage rather than sanction idleness—thus smoothing out friction and effort and benefiting from barely noticeable investments of time and attention, regardless of users' social, economic, or legal status. With the flick of a thumb unlocking their phones, young people may shift from being perceived as undesirable to desirable flâneurs. The dwelling in such online spaces, however, is everything but separate from wider dynamics of exclusion. These nuances of everyday agency can help understand the realm in which digital literacy interventions aim to discipline the unruly alleys of the internet and the unmanaged time wasted on supposedly deficient and passive practices. In the concluding chapter, I develop this argument further.

Notes

1. Today, the concept of the flâneur is often reinvented in subversive ways, for example through activities such as decolonial flâneuring—public walks where the current street scene is viewed through a decolonial lens; see, for example, decolonial flâneuring in Berlin (https://nachbarschaftsinitiativeamostrasse.wordpress.com/dekoloniales-flanieren/) or decolonial walks in Vienna: https://decolonizinginvienna.at/.
2. A streaming platform for music, podcasts, and videos.

CHAPTER 8

Mastery of Space-Time

Introduction

Once detached from its original military purpose, the internet was imagined as a space of freedom, choice, and trust, where passwords were initially unnecessary (Berners-Lee and Fischetti 1999). Over time, however, the internet became a kind of dark place, with the "dark web," "dark patterns" (Brignull 2011), and addictive and persuasive design (Fogg 2009). It seems that the idealized networked world has turned into a sticky spider web, an underground realm where personal data is leaked and collected by opaque giant corporations with unethical business practices, while users' time is devoured and thus disappears into the abyss of wasted time and wasted opportunities. The Frankenstein monster we have created seems out of control, and artificial intelligence seems destined to take over the world. The premise behind the assumption of control lies in the perceived monopoly possessed by corporations pursuing agendas and exerting influence over their powerless audience from the top down. Yet beneath such totalizing imaginaries of control lie the messy, everyday practices through which people inhabit and enliven digital spaces.

Space and Time Out of Control

Media studies scholars and media anthropologists have long dismantled the assumption that large corporations are all-powerful, monolithic media producers that manipulate audiences. Even in her ethnography of the early Hollywood industry, Hortense Powdermaker (1950), for example, showed that media production is subject to many different actors and arbitrary decisions, rather than a unified agenda detached from the

society from which it emerges. But consumers are also complex social actors who form their opinions in more subtle ways than by watching a film. Powdermaker pointed to the social assumptions that made Hollywood responsible for social ills such as juvenile delinquency or divorce. Powdermaker argued, however, that millions of people regularly go to the cinema and "do not become delinquents, criminals, or drunkards" (1950: 11), an argument that can also be applied to violence in video games today.

The more complex the internet becomes, riddled with opaque algorithms, bad actors, and invisible nudges, the more it seems to spiral out of control. Yet, with it, technology is placed outside of society, and its mastery and dominance become an imperative, much like the mastery of nature is embedded in the human-environment relationship in Western thought (Ingold 2000). The chaotic online spaces from which bottomless fake news and conspiracy theories seem to seep from all corners, inspires similar calls for regulation and transparency to which urban spaces are subjected as they increasingly turn clean and efficient, as dark alleys and "loose spaces" are planned out. The vast space can hardly be mapped, measured, or understood, and time seems to be lost in an abyss beyond our control. Collective fears of a loss of control seem particularly amplified when projected onto young users. When coupled with the idea that agency is an expected act of liberation upon entering adulthood (Durham 2008: 165), this notion of loss of control places pressure on youths to understand and conquer the spaces they frequent.

Those who do not jump on the bandwagon of digital mastery seem to be left behind and run the risk of being overrun by the old and new forms of a digital divide. The story of self-optimization in the West is a long one: starting from the Christian concept of talents in the New Testament, where the dishonored servant received valuable "talents" and hid them instead of taking care of them, through to the Greek ideals of bodily perfection, and on to the neoliberal setting of self-help and self-optimization apps. However, the now-digitalized ideal of a self-optimizing person invokes Arjun Appadurai's (2012) critique of the Western tendency to construct streamlined histories. Through his postcolonial critique, Appadurai points out how the selective historiography evident in metatheories has led to a homogeneous history of Western thought, ultimately informing theories of evolution, modernity, and developmentalism while erasing ambiguities and contradictions along the way. By the same logic, it would be unsurprising if the story told hundreds of years from now will be that of the quantified self—how the individualistic, narcissistic, self-optimizing human in the digital, neoliberal age culminated in a self-quantifying digital native—one who only

values friendships when they are reflected in high numbers of followers and Snapchat streaks. But that certainly would not be a story my interlocutors would tell.

If regaining control means installing ad blockers, which educators would typically see as a valuable sign of digital literacy, this does not necessarily align with my interlocutors' sense of justice, for they sometimes felt guilty when depriving others of advertising-related income. In this case, gaining control over one's environment also means actively disadvantaging someone else, even if that someone refers to commercial actors. If "the internet is totally good," as Hammed, a youth center visitor, noted, and you "can get so much knowledge now" and "find out everything online," then why do young people need to master it?

As argued in previous chapters, examining everyday practices within digital environments reveals a plethora of ways in which youths negotiate digital design in noneventful ways, rather than being a vulnerable or even resistant counterpoint to the abstract, global threat of enticing screens and the corporate interests behind them. Attempting to understand this balancing act is not particularly new, as the social sciences, in general, have long been concerned with the relationship between social actors and structural constraints. This problem is also visible in anthropological research on the digital, where the term "appropriation" of space refers to how social actors make online spaces their own (Hahn 2015; Horst and Miller [2003] 2020a; Miller and Slater 2003). The same software is not always used in the way the designers intended; it is creatively appropriated by different actors. This is undoubtedly true to some extent. Users can certainly orchestrate individual apps according to their needs and under their own terms of use (Miller et al. 2021). However, despite the creativity and personalization, these spaces still consist of preexisting bridges, alleys, and arcades that shape these dwellings. The architecture of these spaces is not there to be challenged by default but is often used with as little effort as necessary, and with as little investment as needed, so that the flow and play can continue. The idea that the commercial and entrepreneurial nature of online spaces needs to be challenged by young people, as is often implied by digital literacy guidelines, is barely different from assuming that advertising billboards next to highways must be a cause for concern and suspicion by default. While the commercialization of public spaces is certainly a valid question (see, for example, Sao Paolo's 2006 Lei Cidade Limpa initiative to rid urban spaces of advertising [Plummer 2006]), rejection is not a universal response to advertising in public spaces, especially once they are normalized and rendered an invisible part of infrastructure. Such spaces are not necessarily contested but inhabited and tolerated.

The work of human geographers concerning the conceptualization of space can provide helpful guidance in avoiding the trap of mystifying digital design. Despite the far-from-unproblematic practices of corporate actors and digital designers, and beyond captivating products and political interests touted in the marketplaces of the internet, these spaces are not closed entities that contain a global, dark enemy confronting the local, the everyday, and the grounded (Massey 2005). Instead, they are dwellings that, like physical spaces, exist by "being alive" (Ingold 2011), being walked through, reinforced or contested, not through conscious acts of agency, rebellion, or domination, but often through simply hanging out, playing around, going with the flow and doing nothing, as this book has shown. In Masquelier's ethnography, situated in Niger, the young men who hang out and drink tea sometimes leave traces of their presence by etching their names on the walls. For them, however, this is not simply a territorial conquest aimed at dominating space but rather a making of place in a social context (2013: 486). In Noora Pyyry and Sirpa Tani's work, for example, the youths who hung out in the shopping malls arranged themselves within the music, sounds, and general bustle of the marketplace, but they also disrupted the atmospheres of consumption by engaging in friendship and play instead (2016: 8). Yet, to quote Pyyry again, hanging out "does not need to entail any definable acts, rather it consists of passing and porous moments of intensity during which dwelling with becomes possible" (2016: 14). Such dwelling allows for improvisation and "momentary micro-atmospheres of joy," in which youths can "actively do nothing" (10). In Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren's (2010) terms, these are the nonevents that may seem trivial but are an essential part of engaging with the world. So, how are young social actors constructed against space and time that seem out of control?

Digital Mastery

Seemingly uncontrolled online spaces, seen as swallowing measurable units of time, fit neatly into preexisting narratives in which leisure, especially among the young and marginal, is to be disciplined. Such spaces entail historically entrenched notions of how time is to be effectively used and "spent" as a measurable unit—not only as work but also leisure. Although the social institutions behind them changed over time, such concerns still shine through in government programs and digital education narratives alike. This out-of-control empty time seems to be a wasted opportunity for mental cultivation, as discussed in chapter 6. In

the context of this research, the image of active, productive youths seeking to manage not only their careers but also their boredom, profiles, strategic relationships, and overall online practice seems far removed from the everyday reality of smartphone use and design. The high pressure among private school students who carry the weight of their families' expectations for social mobility, or the sense of stagnation, chronic boredom, and waiting amid unemployment and precarious work are challenges that must be negotiated daily to keep one's head above water. Online spaces are an extension in this context—another overarching social world in which these challenges play out *and* a space where they can be temporarily left behind. Their potency lies in the mix of endless novelty and manipulation of time pressures, time paradoxically paralyzed by the effortless flow of content.

While digital technologies are widely seen as essential in the acceleration of time (Wajcman 2014) and planetary "overheating" (Eriksen 2021a, 2021b), the ethnographic approach reveals the complexity of how digital technologies are employed to structure time in different contexts. For example, several interlocutors in Joseph R. Tulasiewicz and Ellen Forsman's (2021) ethnographic research with residents of a rural cooperative in eastern England relied on digital technologies to dissolve rather than accelerate time. Their interlocutors, who have experienced trauma, loneliness, isolation, and addiction, relied on the atemporality that digital devices evoke. Through their almost-motionless engagement with digital technologies, they became dreamers, numbing and detaching themselves from reality—from the sometimes traumatic past but also from the uncertain future. Here, digital media technologies are inhabited precisely because of the way they stop time. And their architecture builds on this, because it benefits from being an atemporal dwelling. The notion that time is controllable is at odds with a design that is attractive precisely because it dissolves time and the space inherently intertwined with time; it is attractive because it escapes parental surveillance, control, effort, and eventually mastery.

Younger (and generally disadvantaged) dwellers are essential customers in this sphere, as Facebook's not-so-successful struggle to maintain its youthful image by copying design mechanisms successful elsewhere has shown (Shinal 2017). In these spaces, barely noticeable investments of time or money (short scrolls or microtransactions) imply that rewards are within reach and potentially fair. Perhaps this is one reason why betting, casinos, and poker games appeared multiple times during fieldwork. When Erol, the boy who had loaned his laptop to a friend living in a foster home, told me about the *Fortnite* tournament, he was excited about the opportunity to participate. "*Fortnite* is great. Everyone

has a chance to join. It's all about hard work." He then showed me some of the best *Fortnite* players on YouTube, who can earn significant prize money and achieve rock star status in such tournaments. Erol was fascinated by their skills. He pointed out how fast their fingers moved several times. The seemingly effortless play of these players, however, is a result of the increasing professionalization of e-sports, which requires immense investments of time and money for the appropriate equipment and infrastructure, much like choosing the right track leading to a high school diploma, which in Arnel's case seems straightforward but is actually an insurmountable challenge when the institutional logics are hidden from view. The rules of social mobility may remain irrelevant and opaque, despite best efforts. After all, when life circumstances and career opportunities seem to offer little reason for hope, the satisfaction associated with streaks on Snapchat or the faint dream of winning a *Fortnite* tournament certainly have their appeal.

Placing youths in opposition to online spaces shaped by commercial forces and global corporations—therefore implying they need to be mastered—makes users either uneducated, passive pawns, powerless in the face of global actors, or rebellious social actors whose agency could be an act of liberation against addictions, manipulation, fake news, or socioeconomic constraints. In this book, "the everyday" thus emerges not in opposition to global tech corporations and their designers, but as an effortless way of living and building—in intersecting social worlds and all that they entail, be it the effortless strolling to witness the hustle and bustle of everyday life or the effortless microtransactions that extract small amounts of money in exchange for effortless leisure at one's fingertips. In the Western context, where space is a separate entity from time, space and dwelling is often presented disconnected from the number of units of time wasted on the smartphone or internet. Yet, space and time are empirically intertwined (Massey 2005). Dwelling in these digital environments is inextricably linked to spending time—not as efficient, measurable units, but in the context of flow and effortlessness and all the ambiguities that dwelling entails. Dwelling in digital environments does not take place outside of *being*; it is often not about going anywhere in particular.

Dwelling Flâneurs

A flâneur has a trajectory that is not clear, that "leads nowhere and comes from nowhere" (Massey 2005: 115). For the undesirable flâneur, deviating from Walter Benjamin's bourgeois observer, this trajectory

without destination seems out of place in a cultural context where space and time are measured, regulated, and dominated. Yet, as discussed throughout the book, when waiting becomes chronic, "doing nothing" can become a way of participating in the flow of effortless sociality. Craig Jeffrey, in his ethnography of young under- or unemployed men in India, describes that roadside meetings and tea stalls, called *addā*, mean "workplace, site, stand, station (for vehicles) or perch (for birds)" (2010: 94). As he further argues, addās could be seen as a "perch from which they could view the flow of goods, images and people in and out" (94). Sometimes the effortless pleasure lies in simply being in a place where something is happening all the time, but when nothing in particular is happening, that can be an end in itself. After all, to recall a comment from one workshop participant as mentioned in chapter 6, "If it's productive, is it leisure?"

Smartphones are a shiny version of a porch. A porch, that, however, is designed to hide its motherboards. Screens do not invite one to look behind them but are sticky in the front (Richardson 2010). Much like the television offers its smooth face to the viewer and hides the tangle of wires behind it, smartphone screens are designed on the premise of effortless use, of infinite, frictionless, and uninterrupted scrolling through endless content, as the thumb glides over smooth surfaces. They are not designed to show its messy, complex backend that calculates thumb speed and measures attention. Understanding the inner workings is not merely unwelcome; indeed, the incomprehensible terms of use are often cloaked in an air of boring, overlong, abstract legalese that is inaccessible to many, not just to marginalized youths. The designed inevitability of having to give away data for the sake of free services and convenience does not necessarily captivate, capture, and addict, but it heightens the likelihood of compliance. Effortless flow, interlinked with porous design (as discussed in chapter 4), thus better encapsulates the ambiguity of such practices, which are neither here nor there, neither active nor passive. The concept of effortless flow captures the potentiality that is neither necessarily resistance nor surrender. The feed of constant activity on social media does not erase the sense of alienation and "dead time," yet it represents a form of movement, of being alive in stimulating digital environments. The movements of the thumb are a form of dynamic engagement with the environment, yet also one that does not necessarily require commitment. Being on the smartphone is a way of engaging with space and time—not as separate, measurable categories but as an entangled way of being in the world. Understanding the circumstances of both temporary and prolonged chronic waiting (chapter 3) also helps us understand how the effortlessness of digital

technologies embeds itself in the crevices of everyday life and intermingles with narratives of lost productivity and guilt for being online too long. Occasional scrolling or strolling in a social context may not relieve boredom, but it does, much like a tea ritual, "enliven" time spent in waithood (Masquelier 2013: 486).

This fact that it is intentionally inconvenient to look behind the screen does not mean that the act of doing so does not arouse curiosity once it does happen. On one occasion, Can, a frequent youth center visitor, brought his new SLR Nikon camera and proudly showed it to Nick, the staff member, and his peers, who quickly gathered around him. He had had the camera for two weeks, mainly taking portraits of himself and his friends. He was learning how to use it through YouTube videos: "Bit by bit . . . I try it out, then I watch something else and learn something new." He mostly posted the pictures he took directly to Instagram. To do so, he used a Nikon app to conveniently view the images on his smartphone shortly after they were taken on camera. Here, an "old" device is integrated into the smooth Instagram experience, resulting in instant, frictionless image sharing. At this point, Nick remarked, "So Nikon has all your pictures now?"

"No, they don't," Can replied.

"Yes, they do. Have you seen their terms and conditions?" asked Nick, receiving a negative response. "Then let's take a look at them," Nick invited him. For the next twenty minutes, they both searched for the T&Cs and then for the relevant passages of text. Even after Nick moved on, Can kept searching and eventually found that Nick's hunch was correct. Knowing that the whole point of his camera was to be able to share his pictures with his friends on Instagram instantly, he could not and would not do much. Without comment, he shrugged and put his phone in his pocket. Once again, immediate convenience trumped the desire to protect one's data, an already abstract threat. The T&Cs, while a window into the "back of the screen," reflect a rather nebulous image so unappealing and inconvenient that it fades into the background—be it Instagram's commercial scrolling or Nikon's invasion of privacy. But none of that matters much after Toni or Erkan return from a busy day, cozy up on the youth center's sofa, and unlock their smartphones to stroll through the social arcades of fun and distraction without much trouble or worry. Those worries lie elsewhere.

In her research on mobile phones, youth, and intimacy in postwar Mozambique, Julie Soleil Archambault notes how young people negotiate uncertainty by using their mobile phones. She found that "to embark on that cruise, the phone—a mobile phone—was perhaps the single most important item to pack, to bring along" (2017: 20). If some young

people, like the young people Archambault met in Mozambique during her study on mobile phones, feel "adrift" and as if they are "travelling through uncertainty," the question is less about the design of the raft and more about the reasons that make them feel this way. Smartphones and related media technologies offer many escape routes, many of which are historically loaded. The more important question, however, is why smartphones have (also) become a kind of "waiting technology" (Hage 2009: 8) like queue management, call centers, or number machines, all of which regulate time and waiting. In the context of Hollywood's dream factory, Hortense Powdermaker makes an observation about the escape that films offer people: "To some people, the word 'escape' connotes a virtue, for others it is derogatory. But escape, *per se*, is neither good nor bad. All forms of art offer some kind of escape, and it may well be that escape is a necessary part of living. The real question is the quality of what one escapes into" (1950: 12). This book, however, goes further to ask who judges the quality of where one escapes to. In much of the public discourse, the perspective of the young people themselves does not feature when it comes to understanding the qualities of the escape. But more importantly, the question this book centers goes in a different direction, asking instead: What does one escape from? What can digital practices like scrolling tell us about the thing being escaped? And does this question only concern digital media technologies?

The Unbearable Lightness of Scrolling

In chapter 6, I explored how time spent with seemingly trivial digital practices associated with digital escapes turns into wasted time. Yet abstract concepts that attempt to explain the notion of wasted time do not erase the affective, embodied grip of guilt when time is perceived as wasted. "How far did this propaganda really succeed?" wonders Edward P. Thompson in his article on time, class, and productivity. "How far are we entitled to speak of any radical restructuring of man's social nature and working habits?" (1967: 35), he asks, after arguing that perceptions of time, leisure, and time wasting were shaped by class relations in the context of industrialization. In suggesting that these regimes of time were internalized, Thompson was concerned with what would happen to free time once technology-driven productivity liberated the time of the working classes. Thompson's question is still highly relevant in the context of recent debates about unconditional basic income and how time would be redefined once it is liberated, at least to some degree, from its capitalist value. Would "mindless" scrolling still be accompa-

nied by guilt and a sense of lost and wasted time if the "propaganda" of productive time were reversed? The impossibility of answering this hypothetical question reflects the impossibility of distinguishing between designed nudges and the agency of users, or indeed between different forms of waithood from resistance, since both are co-constitutive sides of the same coin. As I have shown, sometimes digital practices like scrolling are about simply lingering, strolling, and letting the world pass by in those moments when my interlocutors were allowed to escape the strict regimes of time and space for a moment; being young and playful and caring about streaks just for the sake of convenience and playfulness and not because they serve to expand social capital; in which ghost-hunting videos were enjoyed for the sake of storytelling, not because they were seen as a source of trustworthy information, and being political did not mean rebellion, but primarily the defense of one's right to watch content for free.

One of the main aims of this book has been to weave the layers of digital design, everyday practices, and the circumstances of the young people I encountered in Vienna into a loosely stitched bricolage. It is a story that is specific to the Viennese context but that is also a reminder that digital practices as seemingly uniform and trivial as scrolling do not have universal qualities but can instead reveal a secret world of very particular social choreographies and meanings. A closer look at digital nonevents can add texture to the spectacular metanarratives that are often far removed from young people's everyday lives. While this type of research does not translate well into recommendations that indicate where the problematic line in the sand is, such research does point to the flexible, subjective, and, at times, exclusionary interpretation of the line.

Having said that, it is now time to return to the words of eighteen-year-old Marko, who explained that by using his phone he was "wasting time for nothing really. And I think it's a shame because I could have learned something or done something useful in that time, but it is what it is . . . you get under this spell." This book has been an attempt to decipher how life circumstances, social expectations, and (digital) inequalities conspire to create the spell, beyond the purely material qualities of screens with their pulsating content. We learned how Marko and his peers negotiated parental expectations, school pressures, and social mobility—a path that seems within reach but often is not, especially when teachers see someone's future of a precarious, undesirable job written into their bodies. We heard from teachers who threatened students with falling off the train, except that the train runs on systemically flawed tracks—in a school system that assigns children their future place

in society at an early age. We met young people who left their schools defeated, crumbling under poor grades and societal demands early on. Schools that do not necessarily inspire hope and do not teach young people how to manage finances, rent, work, or taxes, but that do teach how to stick to strict schedules to prepare for precarious work and disciplined leisure. We have seen young people dealing with waiting and boredom, both while employed *and* unemployed; facing repeated rejections and, worse, silence from companies that do not bother to respond to their applications. We have seen how a variety of social programs, such as employment labs, fill this gap by substituting daily structures and a performed sense of purpose, at least for a brief time. Schemes that, however, may also delay the realization that many of the young people might not find apprenticeships because companies prefer workers they do not have to train, and that these young people might end up in the clutches of temp agencies or exploitative industries, unable to return to rewrite the past or hope for a different future.

When the spotlight is shone on "the digital" in such circumstances, it is tempting to surgically isolate it as a potent cause of addictive dystopia or, ideally, hopeful empowerment. However, as we have seen, reverse-engineering where offline starts and online begins is not only analytically but also empirically flawed—be it in the context of cyberbullying, privacy, gaming, microtransactions, fake news, or prolonged scrolling sessions amid existential boredom. Digital competencies, computers, laptops, and LinkedIn profiles are unlikely to soothe the anxiety of those who lack social support and face silent rejection as their first substantial feedback from the world around them. Overly relying on "productive" and "efficient" digital practices, digital literacies, and "digital detox" to fix underlying issues is not only likely to fail but is also potentially harmful when it reproduces unquestioned norms about how time should be spent, and othering those who do not adhere to it. Ever since "youth" emerged as a social category in many European countries in the nineteenth century, political agendas have initiated efforts to shape their movements through space and time and to reduce idleness, boredom, violence, and vice potentially emerging outside regulated time regimes. Ideals of digital self-control and of the digital mastery of time and space quickly turn political through this lens.

Especially for economically disadvantaged young people or those with migrant or asylum biographies, this means finding their way in a distrustful environment that does not desire potentially troubled "flâneurs" wandering around aimlessly. It is therefore unsurprising that young people are turning to environments where they are seen as desirable flâneurs—spaces that invite the noise and buzz of flâneurs from all

social contexts, even those who are only able to invest microportions of time and money through "nonevents" such as quick scrolling, swiping, snapping, or completing microtransactions. In this context, the smartphone can appear as an easily accessible, free, fair, and welcoming leisure space for those for whom "doing nothing" is not a matter of choice. This is not a simple story of predators and victims. After all, design operates in a blurry middle ground (Seaver 2018): when microtransactions merge with the temporary magic circles that "relieve uncertainty" (Huizinga [1938] 1956: 10); when scrolling during unemployment both alleviates and reinforces boredom; and when commercial online spaces are both a haven for coveted flâneurs and a captivating, capitalist stronghold of consumption. On the one hand, making a product effortless is essential to its usability, but this effortlessness simultaneously turns into a deliberate attempt to erase time and friction through endless feeds and timeless flow. Just as effort is erased in social media, it is reintroduced in cookie notices when it prevents easy access to choices unwanted by website owners. On the other hand, effortless technology is also a part of human history, where technologies are usually created to reduce effort and make tedious tasks more manageable, from washing machines to synchronized devices and platforms with loose approaches to privacy. The porosity of digital design is one of the main reasons for its success. As we have seen, much of the in-between design is supposed to insinuate itself into the mundane moments of life. It therefore enables a multilateral sociality that helps to, for example, comply with expectations (including staying at home to do homework or killing time while unemployed), *and* engage in playful interactions with peers, albeit subject to subtle social choreographies—a situation full of potentialities and ambivalence.

What emerges from this ambivalence is a sense of guilty pleasure: the awareness of the enhanced quality of time that seems to lend itself to being wasted and surrendered to the "unbearable lightness" of scrolling, to borrow the term from the Czech novelist Milan Kundera. His book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) captures the ambivalence of life in the turbulent circumstances of the Czech people fighting for independence from the Soviet Union. Alluding to Nietzsche's thoughts on the ambivalence of experiencing challenges, Kundera asks: "The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?" (1984: 5). For a brief millisecond, an effortless scroll through

a feed may obliterate a sense of boring time, but it still exists within an existential perception of time that oscillates between the heaviness of effort and the lightness of effortlessness. Neither scrolling through social media feeds nor spending time in employment labs obliterates time itself, boredom, or exclusions. Should they, then, not exist?

Conclusion

One of the rare articles in the media landscape (of my personal echo chamber) that offered a more emphatic view of young people's use of digital technologies was published in *The Guardian* in 2024. In the article, entitled "It's Not Them, It's Us," the authors (Stuart and MacDonald 2024) point to the double standard of vilifying youth as "woke softies," restricting their freedoms in unprecedented ways, reducing the spaces available to them and offering them bleak economic prospects, and then blaming them for spending their time in digital spaces. The question, say the authors, is not why they want to "escape to virtual worlds" but is rather: Why would they ever want to come back to the one we've built for them? The article addresses some of the main points raised in this book. Young people in Vienna are confronted with a world that constantly evokes destabilizing crisis narratives, politicized migration, prospects of a disrupted climate, and a future of insecure, flexible, or nonexistent work obliterated by AI. Yet, the area that seems to inspire most urgent political and institutionalized solutions is the issue of the effects of digital media technologies on children and youth. Controlling and mastering the space-time of the internet at large seems like an easy solution to the problem. All young people need are the right tools to conquer these predatory spaces, illuminate their invisible workings, and regain control, despite the inequalities embedded in the foundations of society around them. It is a paradoxical world in which they are expected to be empowered (but not *too* empowered to challenge the school system, employment agencies, or future employers). A world in which they are expected to be digitally savvy but only for vaguely good causes. A world in which they are expected to spend more time on mindful activities that are also productive. In this dilemma, digital media technologies become allies, not because they are typically created with altruistic intentions but because they present themselves as safe and nonjudgmental. Does it make sense to expect young people to want to conquer digital space-time, when space and time regimes are something they are trying to escape from in the first place?

In their book *Parenting for a Digital Future* (2020), the British scholars Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross articulate an empirically informed critique of parenting that seeks to regulate and control their children's screen time and online behavior in general. Instead, they advise parents to really engage with their children and their lifeworlds rather than indiscriminately restricting their online behavior. Many of the assumptions, projections, fears, and well-intentioned calls to regulate the ever-changing world sometimes seem disconnected from the concerns and daily practices of young people themselves. The interlocutors who informed my study had their own ways of making sense of contradictions between societal discourse about digital technologies and what it meant to them in their everyday lives. In workshops and field conversations, I did not encounter a group of "smombies," unreflecting victims of technology, waiting for adults to develop safeguards to solve the problems of guilty pleasures they are unwilling or unable to give up. Nor did I find a group of teenagers organizing romanticized acts of rebellion. Rather, I encountered young people who were not blind to industry practices but rather hoped for some measure of fairness: that the trade-off of privacy for better service and usability was fair and transparent, that no one was intentionally manipulating them, that the data would be used for the company's business success but not sold beyond that. How fair these spaces ultimately are is another question altogether—a question that is, however, not unique or limited to online spaces.

If we treat young people solely as unfinished adults who either need our unsolicited advice or are empowered by top-down digital literacy, we risk overlooking what is really important to them. "Empowerment," without taking responsibility for the wider pressures and inequalities, risks further alienating, mistrusting, and isolating young people who have to endure yet another workshop on social media instead of real societal change. In all the noise surrounding digital technologies, these larger issues should not go unnoticed. It would be a shame if the only ones paying attention were digital market criers pursuing hidden transactions.

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