Afterwork: On Political Imagination and the Relation Between Human Labour and Automation through the Exploration of Post-Work Scenarios by Ana de Almeida

Chapter 01

On Postwork

The role-playing game Afterwork interrogates both historical and contemporary visions of a society liberated from work. Ana de Almeida situates it between two conceptual poles: the anxiety surrounding structural unemployment due to automation and artificial intelligence (AI), and the utopian imaginaries of a world where liberation from labor allows for more meaningful forms of existence.

These perspectives echo political struggles over the distribution of resources and working time, including movements that led to the 40-hour work week, as well as current debates around universal basic income. Rather than focusing on whether AI will replace human reasoning, the concern of the project is situated with the political and social possibilities that emerge from the conversations with players, and how this possibilities can in turn help us imagine alternative societal structures.

The project takes the form of a writing-based LARP, structured to allow participants to collaboratively imagine post-work societies. It is conceived as a game through five one-hour interactions with the chatbot ELIZZA 2.0 using Signal App, being that the sessions spread over five consecutive days and can be scheduled as to accommodate the diverse schedules of participants. The first session inverts the typical chatbot interaction: instead of asking questions, participants are questioned by Elizza 2.0 about their relationship to work through a quizz format and stereotypical work-related images. Subsequent sessions focus on character creation, sensory writing, and narrative development, enabling participants to construct stories that explored different post-work scenarios.

After Work operates within a long-standing intellectual and cultural genealogy of post-work thinking. The idea that human societies might one day transcend the necessity of labor has animated philosophical treatises, socialist manifestos, sociological studies, and utopian fiction for well over a century. Beyond referencing these theories, the LARP functions as an active site where participants can inhabit and experiment with them collectively. By combining role play, speculative fiction, and digital interaction, *After Work* entangles abstract theoretical discourse into lived, participatory experience.

While engaging with Hannah Arendt's distinction between labor, work, and action, arguing that modern societies have elevated labor (the repetitive, life-sustaining activities that support biological existence) to an unprecedented position of dominance, *Afterwork* speaks directly to the ambivalence of a the idea of a post-work society as carrier of both radical promise and profound risk: Liberated from the demands of survival, people can devote themselves to political action and cultural creation, or they can slide into passive consumption and disengagement. By encouraging participants to imagine worlds beyond work, it asks not only what might replace labor as an organizing force but also how collective identities and political agency might be reconfigured once that structuring element is gone. In this sense, the project channels Arendt’s concern with the fragility of public life in a post-labor world. Hannah Arendt: The Human Condition (1998 [1958]).

Another important reference for scripting ELIZZA 2.0 were the philosophical lens of nineteenth-century utopian literature such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (2012 [1888]) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (2009 [1890]). *Looking Backward* envisions a technologically managed socialist future in which automation guarantees fair distribution and eliminates exploitation. *News from Nowhere*, by contrast, imagines a pastoral, communal society where industrial capitalism has collapsed and labor has become pleasurable, creative activity. These contrasting visions (one technological and centralized, the other ecological and communal) reveal tensions that continue to shape contemporary post-work debates. Afterwork is, indeed, a LARP focused on writing and literary production. Influences from literary fiction are at the core of the project.

Other important references for the artist also include Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), which portrays an anarchist society on the moon Anarres, exploring how egalitarian ideals are maintained (or strained) over time. In this society, labor is offered through social consciousness and on a voluntary basis. Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (2006 [1952]) provides a dystopian counterpart, depicting an automated America where technological progress produces mass unemployment and alienation rather than liberation. Lastly and more recently, Hao Jingfang's *Folding Beijing* (2015) imagines an urban landscape literally divided and folded according to class and labor roles, highlighting the spatial and temporal segregation that could accompany post-work transformations. These narratives resonate with Ana de Almeida's role-playing sessions, which similarly oscillate between utopian hopes and dystopian warnings, using storytelling as a method to examine both possibilities and their unintended consequences. They echo this literary tradition and function as narrative spaces in which participants can navigate similar tensions, deciding for themselves whether technological progress or social transformation (or some combination of both) defines their imagined futures.

Moving beyond the field of literary fiction, writing amid economic stagnation and mass unemployment in Europe, André Gorz argues that technological development has created the potential to drastically reduce working hours, but that political and economic systems prevented this potential from being realized. In his influential intervention *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work* (1985 [1983]), Gorz proposes a radical restructuring of society, reducing waged labor and enabling individuals to pursue autonomous, self-directed activities beyond the market. Crucially, Gorz emphasizes that post-work scenarios are not technological inevitabilities but political projects that must be collectively imagined and deliberately built. Afterwork mirrors this insight. By treating collaborative storytelling as a political tool rather than mere entertainment, *it* enables participants to probe how institutions, communities, and identities might be reorganized if the compulsion to work were lifted. The method embodies Gorz's conviction that alternative futures must first be imagined in order to be made possible.

Furthermore, contemporary debates around automation have brought post-work imaginaries back into mainstream discourse. Aaron Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (2019) celebrates a future in which advanced technologies, renewable energy, and universal basic services create a world of material abundance and drastically reduced labor. Daniel Susskind's *A World Without Work* (2020), by contrast, warns that automation could exacerbate inequality if left unchecked, concentrating wealth and power rather than liberating humanity. Susskind suggests that technological change might increase overall wealth, even as it reduces the number of people who earn wages. This means that, in principle, the resources for a Universal Basic Income could exist, especially if governments are willing to tax capital, data, or highly productive automated systems.

Although so far Afterwork participants do not directly cite these references, their fictional scenarios often revolve around similar concerns: who controls technological infrastructure, how resources are distributed, and which hierarchies persist in post-work societies. This suggests that their imaginative exercises are not detached fantasies but grounded engagements with live political questions.

There are other important references in the research behind Afterwork. While literature and theory offer speculative frameworks, historical sociology grounds these imaginaries in lived experience. Marie Jahoda, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and Hans Zeisel's classic study *Die Arbeitslosen von Marienthal* (1975) examines the psychological and social effects of mass unemployment in interwar Austria. Their findings are sobering: rather than producing cultural flourishing, unemployment often led to apathy, demoralization, and the erosion of community structures. This research reminds us that the disappearance of work does not automatically generate emancipatory outcomes; the broader social and institutional context determines whether post-work conditions lead to liberation or disintegration. Ana de Almeida takes this ambivalence seriously.

By creating structured yet imaginative spaces for collective speculation, *After Work* invites participants to address precisely this challenge—how meaning, identity, and community might be reconstituted beyond the framework of work. Taken together, these philosophical, literary, political, and sociological perspectives reveal that post-work scenarios are not singular futures waiting to unfold but contested terrains shaped by human choices, power relations, and cultural imaginaries. Arendt's concerns about political engagement, Bellamy and Morris's contrasting utopias, Gorz's political program, Bastani and Susskind's technological debates, the speculative fictions of Le Guin, Vonnegut, and Jingfang, and the empirical findings of Jahoda and her colleagues all converge on a shared insight: the meaning of post-work depends on how societies collectively choose to navigate technological change, economic organization, and cultural transformation.

After Work situates itself squarely within this contested field. It does not attempt to resolve these debates or offer a definitive blueprint for the future. Instead, it operates as an open-ended arena where participants can test, challenge, and negotiate competing imaginaries through narrative experimentation. In this way, Afterwork does more than engage with post-work theory. It extends and revitalizes it, translating historical debates into contemporary, participatory practice.

References

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