

# To-Do is To Be

Alterity, ethics and subjectivation  
in technological mediation



The image shows a screenshot of a game character's status screen. On the left is a pixelated character named LeYak, a yellow and black creature with blue wings and a red flower on its chest. Below the character is a purple butterfly icon. To the right of the character, the text reads "LeYak" and "Niveau 15 Dief". Below this are three horizontal progress bars, each with a colored icon on the left and a numerical value on the right. The first bar is red with a heart icon and shows 42 / 50. The second bar is orange with a star icon and shows 265 / 350. The third bar is blue with a diamond icon and shows 46 / 74.

Stat	Current Value	Max Value
Health (Heart)	42	50
Energy (Star)	265	350
Mana (Diamond)	46	74

# Context: post-phenomenology and ethics

- Verbeek (2005, 2011) describes the active and mediating role technology plays in our perception as well as actions.
- He also investigates the technologically mediated character of our (moral) norms, decisions, actions and even our( )selves
- Realizing this, ethical theories based on the modernist separation of subjects and objects, humans and technologies, will no longer do (and are no longer sufficient to guide design)



# An ethics for technological mediation

- Verbeek develops an outline for an ethics of technological mediation along two lines:
  1. *'An ethics of design'*: appreciation of the active role technologies have in morality should focus our attention on ways we can design these technologies and their moral mediations better
  2. *'An ethics of technologically mediated subjectivation'*: if we are to resist being determined by the technologies that mediate our existence, we are to actively shape ourselves and our way of living in relation to the technologies with which we live.

# Inspired by Foucault

- *Foucault's later work*: even if the subject subjectivates through ascetic practices the power(s) that define us
- Focus on resistance and liberation



relations, it can self-  
*s of the self* amidst

- *In Verbeek*: unproductive to think mainly in terms of resistance. Rather, shaping ourselves by *actively and consciously relating* to technologies that co-shape our decisions, actions, etc.

# Questions

- What does such a process of self-subjectivation look like?
- Is there a specific model of subjectivity that might help guide it?
- How do I relate to myself and what is technology's role in this relation?
- Where does the freedom and motivation to engage in these mediated practices of (self-)subjectivation come from?
- And lastly, how might answering these questions help to better design the technologies involved in subjectivation?
- ...



# Technologies for self-improvement

- To Do-lists:
  - Invite me to *do* things, and do them ‘in spite of myself’: ascetic practices
  - Allow for conscious self-improvement since I decide what to put on them
  - They can play a rather active and prominent role in these practices

# To-Do list #1: the written word

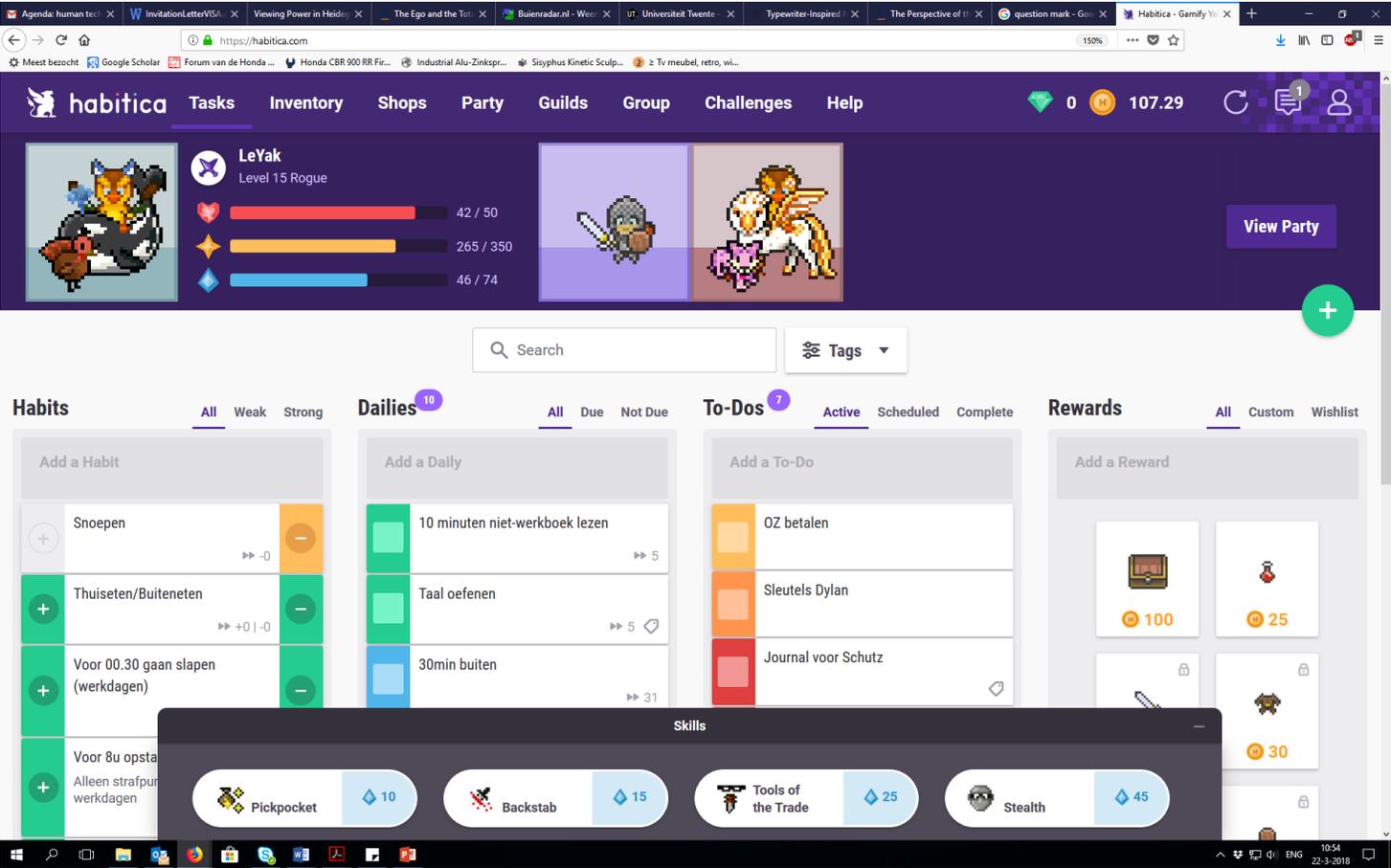


# To-Do list #2: ToDoist

The screenshot displays the ToDoist web application interface. At the top, there is a red header bar with a search icon, the text "Quick Find", and a notification bell icon with "15306" next to it. The main content area is divided into three sections:

- Left Sidebar:** Contains navigation options: "Inbox", "Today 1", and "Next 7 days 31". Below these are sections for "Projects", "Labels", and "Filters". A list of projects is shown, including "DNY GL 47", "Personal 115", "DWL 66", "24x7.photo 12", "Oslo GTD Gathering 5", "DEVCO 4", "Incubated 2", "Someday/Maybe 8", "GTD Weekly Review 16", and "GTD Focus Horizons". There is also an "Add Project" button and a section for "Archived projects".
- Center Panel:** Titled "Inbox", it features an "Add Task" button.
- Right Panel:** A "Your Productivity" dashboard. It shows "1371 completed tasks" with a link to "View all completed tasks". A "Karma Trend" line graph shows an upward trend, with a note "+2 on last update!". Below this are two horizontal bar charts: "Completed last 7 days" and "Completed last 4 weeks". At the bottom, it displays "Daily Streak: 4 days" (Longest: 18 days, 14 Aug - 2 Sep) and "Weekly Streak: 17 weeks" (Longest: 17 weeks, 2 Jan - 27 Feb). A "Karma Settings and Goals" link is at the very bottom.

# To-Do list #3: Habitica



# Experiencing To Do lists

- Some distinct episodes and moments:
  - *Doing badly*: procrastinating (I am looking at you, Youtube!)
  - *Confrontational moment*: I am confronted with my doing badly. I 'run into myself' and do not like what I see
  - *Objectifying moment*: coming to self-understanding, possibly based on the To Do list, which allows me to turn myself into a project
  - *Ascetic practices*: I do things 'in spite of myself', and in doing so, work on myself

# A fitting model of subjectivity'?

- Needs to account for the 4 'episodes' described above
- Needs to include the possibility of fundamental self-awareness, thematic self-awareness, and the *motivation to work on myself based on confrontational moments*

=> *Phenomenology of E*

	precondition for =>		
Stage	Origins of the I: Egoism	Light of the Other: Ethics	Comparison of Incomparables: Justice
Human-orientation	I	Other	Third
Leading Experience	Enjoyment	Responsibility	Justice
Objectivation Regime	Possession	Gift	Techno-Politics

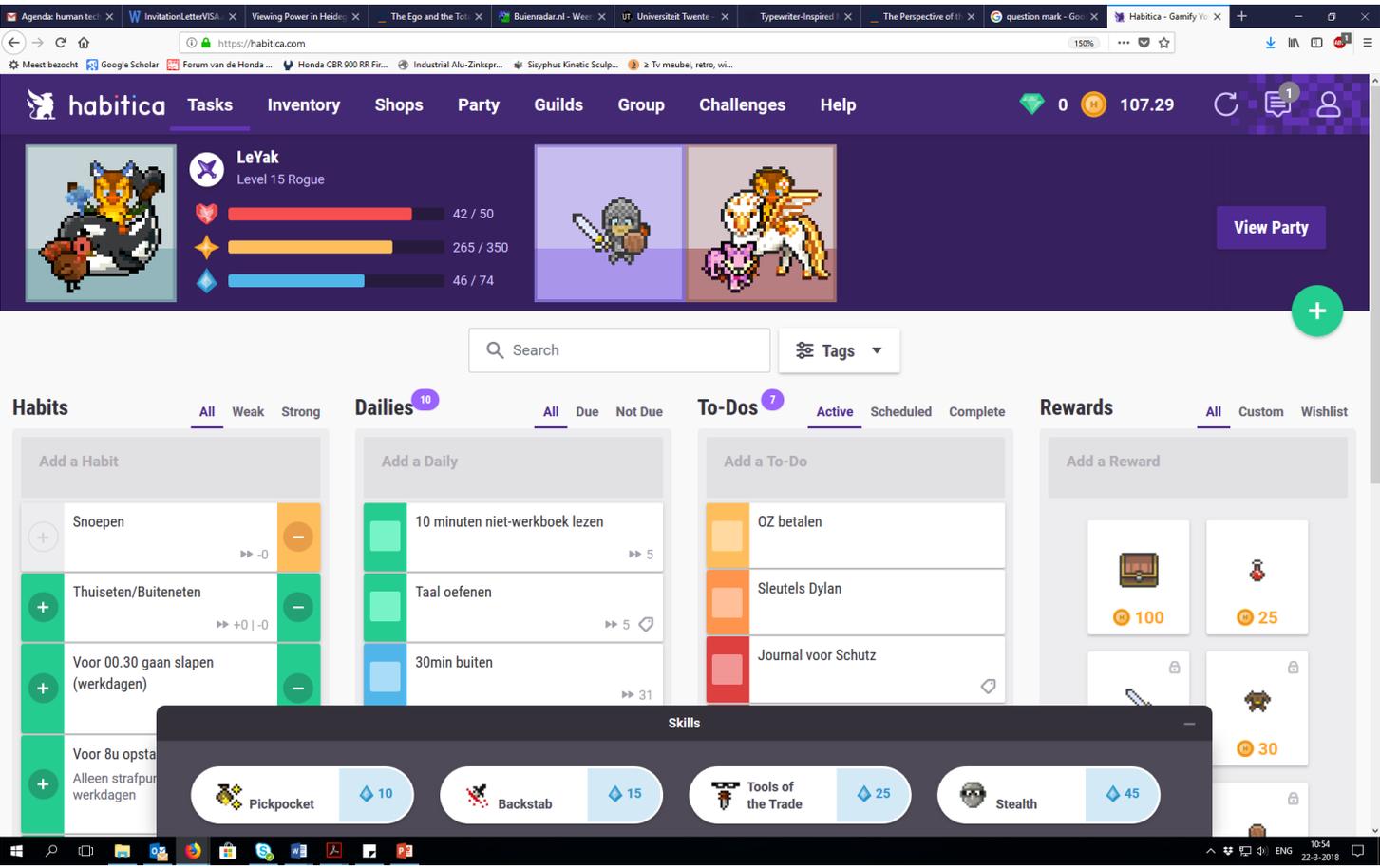
Procrastination

Confrontational moment (motivation+ subjectivation)

Objectifying moment (self-awareness)

Levinas' confrontational phenomenology

# Technologies as Others?



# Technologies as Others?

- In Levinas: not really. However, some ‘special cases’:
  - Art/paintings (expressive and frustrate enjoyment of things represented) (CPP)
  - Architecture (is aesthetic, expressive and mysterious. Has a facade)
- In Ihde (1979): yes, as quasi-others; alterity without ethical baggage nor direct link to subjectivity
- E.g., Wellner (2016): (touch)screen-technologies as having a quasi-face, demanding or at least inviting responses.

# Technologies as Others?

- Hypothesis:

*Technologies are not infinitely Other (like human others also are), but can be sufficiently other to appeal to the Other-induced responsibility that lies at the basis of our subjectivity. They can pick at the scars left by the trauma of responsibility.*

# The role of technology in self-improvement

1. Providing some of the substance of my enjoyment (positive reinforcement through gamification)  
-> negative role?
2. Inducing confrontational and objectifying moments  
( ~mediation of [self-]perception)
3. Structuring and supporting ascetic practices (mediation of praxis)

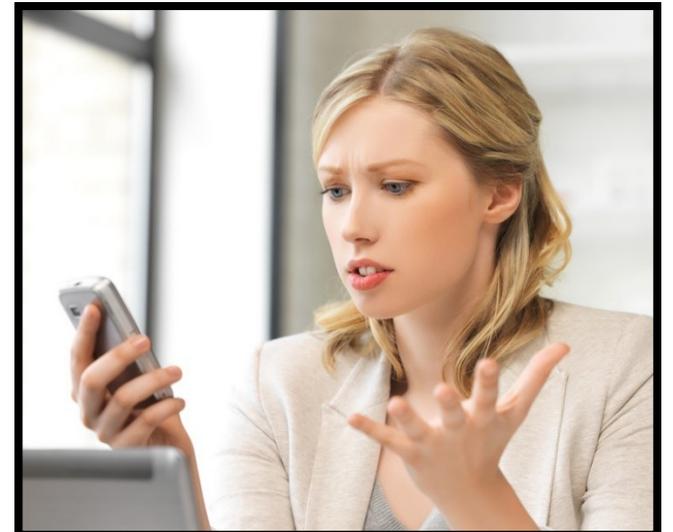
# Technology and self-confrontation #1

- The technology confronts me with a representation of myself, a representation which is me, yet other to me. This discrepancy calls me to action.
  - I -> (technology - [Self])
- a 'technologically mediated *critical alterity relation to self*' AND a hermeneutical relation to self



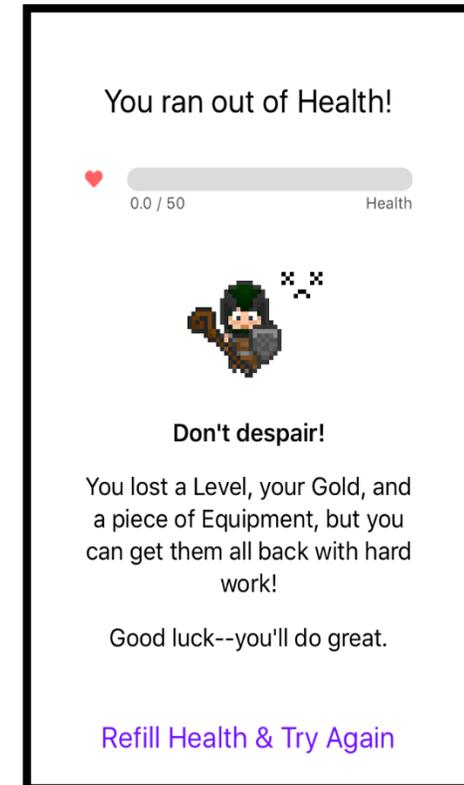
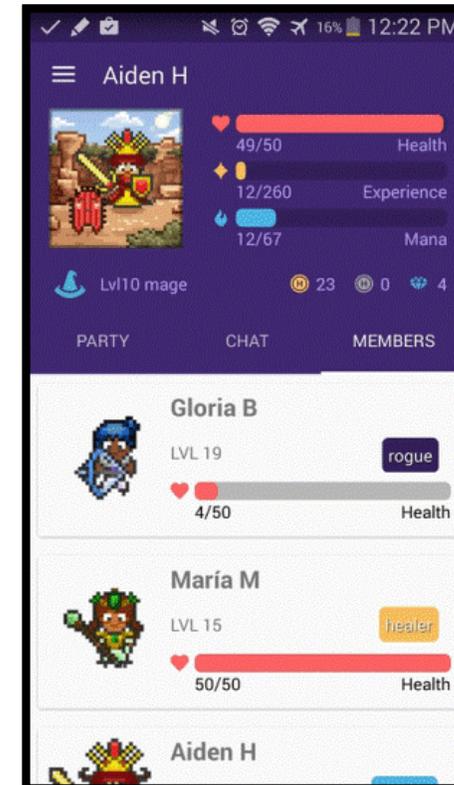
# Technology and self-confrontation #2

- The technology confronts me without giving (much of) a representation of myself.  
/ might get problematized in the process.
  - (I-technology) -> [I]
- a technologically mediated *critical relation to the I.*



# Technology and self-confrontation #3

- The technology confronts me by providing an other who calls me to responsibility, either by mediating real other or by emulating others
- In the case of mediating my access to real Others:
  - **I – (technology) - -> Other -> [I]/[Self]**  
(depending on the provision of self-representation)
- In the case of the technology emulating others:
  - **I -> (technology – other) -> [I]/[Self]**  
(depending on the provision of self-representation)
- technologically mediated critical other-relations.



# In Sum

- Levinas provides a model of subjectivity that:
  - Puts ethics squarely into the (post)phenomenological
  - is not reduced to its 'whatness', but is grounded in responsibility
  - Is other-induced, so ascribes a constitutive role to other persons and technologies
- Technologies can play their role in active and conscious self-subjectivation through confrontational and objectifying moments, and through structuring ascetic practices.
- Confrontational moments are concretely structured in a number of different alterity relations that are more or less directly *I- or self-critical*, exposing *my* vulnerability.

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