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editorial

*Work, play and boredom*
Nick Butler, Lena Olaison, Martyna Sliwa, Bent Meier Sørensen and Sverre Spoelstra

articles

*Work and play in management studies: A Kleinian analysis*
Donncha Kavanagh

*Playbour, farming and labour*
Joyce Goggin

*‘Creativity loves constraints’: The paradox of Google’s twenty percent time*
Abe Walker

*In praise of boredom*
Norman Jackson and Pippa Carter

*Who is Yum-Yum? A cartoon state in the making*
Niels Åkerstrom Andersen

*The game of hospitality*
Hanne Knudsen

*Poker phases: Draw, Stud and Hold’Em as playforms of capitalism*
Ole Bjerg

*Work = work ≠ work: In defence of play*
Sophie-Thérèse Krempl and Timon Beyes
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>note</th>
<th>On boredom: A note on experience without qualities</th>
<th>482</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rasmus Johnsen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>reviews</th>
<th>The work of games</th>
<th>490</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jacob J. Peters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|              | The playing fields of late capitalism             | 495 |
|              | Peter Fleming                                     |     |
Work, play and boredom

Nick Butler, Lena Olaison, Martyna Sliwa, Bent Meier Sørensen and Sverre Spoelstra

I’m bored
I’m bored
I’m the chairman of the bored
(Iggy Pop, ‘I’m bored’)

Play utopia

In recent years, play has become an abiding concern in the popular business literature and a crucial aspect of organizational culture (Costea, et al., 2005). While managerial interest in play has certainly been with us for some time, there is a sense that organizations are becoming ever-more receptive to incorporating fun and frivolity into everyday working life. Team-building exercises, simulation games, educational games (see Andersen; Knudsen, this issue), puzzle-solving activities, office parties, themed dress-down days, and colourful, aesthetically-stimulating workplaces are notable examples of this trend. Through play, employees are encouraged to express themselves and their capabilities, thus enhancing job satisfaction, motivation and commitment. Play also serves to unleash an untapped creative potential in management thinking that will supposedly result in innovative product design, imaginative marketing strategies and, ultimately, superior organizational performance. Play, it seems, is a very serious business indeed: It ‘pays to play’ as Deal and Key (1998: 115) insightfully put it.

This is a relatively new conception of the relation between work and play. Until very recently, play was seen as the antithesis of work (see Kavanagh, this issue). Classical industrial theory, for example, hinges on a fundamental distinction between waged labour and recreation. Play at work is thought to pose a threat not only to labour discipline, but also to the very basis of the wage bargain: In exchange for a day’s pay, workers are expected to leave their pleasures at home. Given this context, we can well understand Adorno’s (1978: 228) comment that the purposeless play of children – completely detached from selling one’s labour to earn a living – unconsciously rehearses the ‘right life’. But play no longer holds the promise of life after capitalism, as it once did for Adorno; today, the ‘unreality of games’ is fully incorporated within the reality of organizations. When employees are urged to reach out to their ‘inner child’
(Miller, 1997: 255), it becomes clear that the distinction between work and play is increasingly difficult to maintain in practice (see also Goggin, this issue).

With such blurring of work and play, the traditional boundary between economic and artistic production also disappears. In much of the business literature on play, the entrepreneur and the artist melt into one figure. This is evident in a recent book about the importance of play in business, entitled *The Business Playground* (Stewart and Simmons, 2010). The book, co-authored by the former Eurythmics member Dave Stewart, features a preface by Virgin boss Richard Branson as well as an endorsement from Bob Dylan (‘Captain Dave is a dreamer and a fearless innovator’ [Dylan, in *ibid.*: i]). This gives the impression that Branson’s enterprising investments and Dylan’s inventive musicianship belong to one and the same category; both are products of ‘the creative child inside of all of us’ (Branson, in *ibid.*: x). Creativity is important because it generates business, and business can only happen because of creativity. Here we find that imaginative play and artistic expression not only become fully incorporated within work (see Krempl and Beyes, this issue), but they are precisely what makes work productive and worthwhile in the first place.

In much of the business literature on work and play a certain utopianism can be recognised, often evoking the pre-Lapsarian ideal of a happy life without hard work. In this respect, organizations seem to have taken notice of Burke’s (1971: 47) compelling vision of paradise: ‘My formula for utopia is simple: it is a community in which everyone plays at work and works at play. Anything less would fail to satisfy me for long’. But, as the contributions to this issue show, such idealism is not necessarily desirable. For while play promises to relieve the monotony and boredom of work, it is intimately connected to new forms of management control: It is part of the panoply of techniques that seek to align the personal desires of workers with bottom-line corporate objectives. We should not be surprised, then, when an overbearing emphasis on fun in the workplace leads to cynicism, alienation and resentment from employees (Fleming, 2005; see also Fleming, this issue). Perhaps, then, the relation between alienated labour and spontaneous creative expression is not quite as antithetical as one might initially imagine.

Yet while contemporary organizations have colonized play for profit-seeking purposes, this inevitably has unforeseen consequences. Play may turn back against the organization and disrupt its smooth functioning; the managers who open a game in the organization may find that they lose control over it and come to realize that play is occasionally able to usurp work rather than stimulate it (Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012). Play serves organizational objectives only insofar as it is kept within certain ludic limits. However, as Letiche and Maier (2005: 62) put it, ‘the “game” plays the participants at least as much as the participants play the game’, which suggests that these limits are all-too easily transgressed. Playing is a risky endeavour, as Gadamer (1975: 106) reminds us: ‘All playing is a being-played’.

This special issue emerged from an *ephemera* conference on ‘Work, Play and Boredom’ held at the University of St Andrews in May 2010. At the heart of the conference was the idea that ‘boredom’ might be an appropriate concept for rethinking the interconnections between work and play in present-day organizations. While play at
work has been extensively discussed in the popular and academic literature, the role of boredom has been somewhat neglected. While this predominant academic interest is reflected in the composition of this special issue of *ephemera*, we hope to open up a space for exploring the overlapping themes of work, play and boredom in the context of contemporary organizational life. Before we introduce the contributions to this issue, let us first therefore offer some reflections on the links between playing at work and being bored.

**Play as the antidote to boredom**

In the modern world, ceaseless mobility, digital connectivity and electronic gadgetry serve to induce ‘a mood of profound boredom’ that calls for even more frivolous entertainment, so distracting us from more meaningful activity (Wrathal, 2005: 110). To understand our contemporary condition, it is helpful to look back at Heidegger’s ideas about the place of boredom in the context of our lives. For Heidegger (1995), boredom is connected to the inauthentic busyness of everyday life. It is in our free time, Heidegger suggests, that such boredom manifests itself most forcefully:

> For contemporary man, who no longer has time for anything, the time, if he has free time, becomes immediately too long. He must drive away the long time, in shortening it through a pastime. The amusing pastime is supposed to eliminate or at least to cover up and let him forget the boredom. (Heidegger, cited in Wrathal, 2005: 111)

What has changed today is that the experience of free time that Heidegger describes is increasingly becoming a part of our working lives. It is no longer exclusively outside the factory gates, but now also within the fun-filled office that such amusement and diversion is to be found. This suggests that management’s desire to mobilize play as a means of enhancing creativity and boosting productivity among the workforce is motivated by a desire to cover up the boredom that is an inherent feature of waged labour. We therefore suggest that work (often representing monotony and repetition) and play (the very opposite of ennui and indifference) bear an intrinsic relation to the experience of boredom and the concomitant desire to escape from it.

The relation between play and boredom features prominently in the work of positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, especially in terms of the idea of ‘flow’. This notion refers to a state of being in which participants are fully absorbed in what they are doing, thereby losing any sense of self. Echoing the gospels of play in the contemporary business literature, Csikszentmihalyi argues that the conventional distinction between work and play is in fact misleading:

> the essential difference is not between ‘play’ and ‘work’ as culturally defined activities but between the ‘flow’ experience (which typically occurs in play activities but may be present in work as well) and the experience of anxiety and boredom (which may occur in any time and place but is more likely in activities that provide either too few or too many opportunities of action). (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: 185)

For Csikszentmihalyi, the work-play dyad is far less compelling as a grid of intelligibility than the binary opposition between flow (total immersion in activities, whether working or playing) and boredom/anxiety (neither engaging play nor absorbing
The experience of flow, moreover, can lead individuals towards personal fulfilment as well as help them to survive severe hardship in extremely difficult conditions. Indeed, as Csikszentmihalyi (2000: 193) tells us, such is the power of flow that ‘[e]ven in concentration camps, prisoners who are able to superimpose a symbolic world, with its own goals and rules, on the grim “reality” of their condition seem to survive better and sometimes even enjoy their experience’. One can see how this experience of flow might be incorporated into the modern workplace, mobilised in the service of management, in order to mitigate the negative consequences of contemporary organizational life such as long hours, poor pay and overwork without actually having to shorten the working day, raise wages or reduce workloads. One might even learn, eventually, to ‘enjoy’ one’s own exploitation. Thus, play and work – defined in terms of their ability to capture one’s full attention – run alongside one another, no longer in hostile opposition, but now united against the forces of boredom and anxiety.

We find similar sentiments expressed in the popular business literature, in which play is no longer seen as the antithesis of work but instead is viewed as an important ally in the fight against tedium. Boredom, on this view, is not understood simply as an unpleasant but inevitable psychological state experienced by employees, but as a serious impediment to organizational efficiency and innovation. The stuffy and mirthless bureaucratic – who is simultaneously bored by the job and boring to work with – can be seen as the true pariah of today’s workplace; no place for them, it seems, within the Googleplex (see Walker, in this issue). The more the workplace resembles an adventure playground and the less it looks like a dull and dreary office, so the theory goes, the more value is added to the bottom line.

The idea that the playful worker is a productive worker has certainly gained currency in the business world. But the game of capitalism welcomes other types of players to its table. Financial investors, for example, play the market with reckless – and perhaps also joyful – abandon (see Bjerg, this issue). Here, hard-nosed economic opportunism perfectly dovetails with the search for pleasurable stimulation. This view is succinctly expressed in the recent book *Screw Work, Let’s Play*:

Players are not new-age dreamers. We play with capitalism, we notice what our market needs and we see providing value and making money as part of the game. Players understand that money makes play sustainable. And players often make more money than workers because we love what we do. (Williams, 2010: 14, emphasis in original)

From this perspective, economic success is predicated less on hard (and potentially unenjoyable) graft than it is on modes of playful behaviour such as spontaneity, flexibility and responsiveness. Doing business in a playful way, or in a state of flow (as Csikszentmihalyi might say), keeps boredom at bay and the money rolling in: Put simply, flow makes capital flow. By absorbing themselves completely in global markets, players of this game remind us that the greatest enemy of corporate life today is not revolutionary insurrection but sedentary indolence, a permanent state of boredom that stultifies and blocks. No wonder, then, we have witnessed such a proliferation of playfulness within a range of organizations, from marketing boutiques and technology start-ups to call centres and insurance firms. Such symbols of play at work – wacky furniture, toy scooters, themed offices, paintballing and the like – can be seen as forms
of ‘imperialistic anti-depressives’ alongside other corporate excesses and extravagances that seek to alleviate the symptoms of boredom (Ten Bos and Kaulingfreks, 2002: 21).

Perhaps, then, it is time to reflect seriously on the importance of boredom at work. This is necessary because boredom – alongside other ‘undesirable’ states of mind such as anger and contempt – is frequently silenced within organization studies (Peltzer, 2005). Nevertheless, boredom might be seen to indicate the potential for emancipation, which we would be unwise to overlook (see Johnsen, this issue). As Walter Benjamin (1999: 105) observes, ‘we are bored when we don’t know what we are waiting for’. Boredom thus contains a sense of anticipation, even promise: ‘Boredom is the threshold to great deeds’ (ibid.). Boredom reminds us of the paucity of the present and holds open the prospect of an as-yet undetermined future, and is thus resolutely utopian in its orientation. Since capitalism is currently preoccupied with fun and games, attempting to establish ludic relations with each and all, perhaps (to paraphrase Adorno) it is boredom rather than play that now serves unconsciously to rehearse the ‘right life’ in contemporary times. All the more important, then, for us to relearn the ‘the art of boredom’ in modern-day organizations (Sloterdijk, 2009: 248; see also Carter and Jackson, this issue).

The contributions

In the first paper in this special issue Donncha Kavanagh, drawing on Melanie Klein’s work, argues that the industrial distinction between work (as good) and play (as bad) is fundamental for the further development of the field of management and organization studies. The paper goes on to provide an analysis of seven different ways in which the relation between work and play is understood today. It shows how contemporary management and organization studies attempts to move away from the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position of work as good and play as bad at the same time as it remains haunted by it.

Joyce Goggin adds to Kavanagh’s examination of the supposedly oppositional spheres of work and play. The papers considers a number of different social actors, including office workers for whom having fun is an obligation; modders and fans who through their creative engagement with games serve to produce value; sweatshop workers who ‘grind’ in video games; and Chinese prisoners who are forced, without pay, to work in internet gaming. The analysis shows that the merging of work and play shifts and blurs; for example, while some play is valorised for some as low-paid work, the same activities may be seen as mere play by others.

In the next article, Abe Walker critically discusses Google’s ‘time off’ program in which programmers spend 20% of their working time on projects of their own choosing. This program is presented by Google as a gift to its workers, but Walker suggests that the program is in fact designed to increase managerial control. Rather than relieving the work of programmers, 20 Percent Time often intensifies it. But this form of control is far from complete and cannot exist without also offering the potential for resistance. Walker concludes by outlining some strategies that Google workers may adopt to resist the company’s subtle attempt to increase productivity.
Norman Jackson and Pippa Carter advocate boredom as ‘a useful antidote to exploitation at work’ (400). Throughout their paper, Carter and Jackson remind us that boredom has a great emancipatory potential: Rather than being seen as a phenomenon that requires remedial action on the part of management, boredom should be used by workers to ‘generate the desire to escape from work to something more pleasurable’ (402). In putting forward their argument in praise of boredom, Jackson and Carter turn to poetry as an alternative form of exploring the relationship between work and boredom.

Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen outlines what he names the ‘cartoon state’ through an analysis of the Danish campaign ‘Healthy through play’ that is aimed at ‘vulnerable’ families to educate them about developing a healthy lifestyle. The campaign makes use of a cartoon character called ‘Yum-Yum’, ‘an adult who knows what is right and good for everyone, but he is also an innocent child. He is a hybrid between adult and child and between responsibility and innocence’ (429). It is via this character, Anderson suggests, that the state turns itself into a state that is not a state, ultimately concerned with the self-creation of its citizens.

The focus on creating and educating responsible citizens is continued in Hanne Knudsen’s exploration of what happens when, through the mobilisation of play as a technology used in Danish schools, ‘parents are invited to invite the school into the family’ (433). Knudsen’s insightful analysis of the negotiation of boundaries between school and family reveals ‘the responsibility game’ as ‘a clever managerial technology, interfering in relations in the family, and a challenge to the school’s possibility for taking responsibility for being the host of the meeting between school and family’ (447).

Ole Bjerg, meanwhile, draws out intriguing parallels between the development of capitalism and the evolution of poker, suggesting that the ‘structural homologies’ between the macro economic system and the various types of poker (i.e. Draw, Stud and Hold’Em) are more than mere coincidences. As Bjerg notes, ‘the game has an eminent capacity to capture a set of existential conditions of life in contemporary capitalism and offer these to the players in a form that allows them to explore, challenge, and play with these conditions’ (450).

In a response to the notion that play has been fully integrated within work and that, as a result, artistic critique has lost its potential to function outside capitalist relations – implicit in Bolanski and Chiapello’s distinction between social and artistic critique – Sophie-Thérèse Krempl and Timon Beyes take on a ‘paradoxical mode of analysis’. Through such an approach the paper proposes a more complex notion of work and argues that ‘the insolubility of paradox and the paradoxical constitution of work reopen rather than foreclose the question of play and thus the possibilities and capacities of artistic critique’ (467).

Returning to the theme of boredom, Rasmus Johnsen’s note scrutinises the very experience of boredom in which, he argues, ‘identity is turned into a problem, a question, into something fundamentally precarious’ (485). Through his analysis of boredom as an ‘experience without qualities’, Johnsen contends that boredom deserves
the same degree of research interest from organization and management scholars that is currently given to ‘more conventional pathologies’ (488) such as depression and stress.

The sociological importance of games so evocatively captured in Bjerg’s contribution is further explored in the two book reviews in this issue. While Jacob Peters examines the political economy of video games in Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s *The Games of Empire*, Peter Fleming looks at the history of organizational play (encompassing competitive games in the mid-nineteenth century, training and simulation games in the mid-twentieth century and social creation games in the present day) outlined in Åkerstrøm Andersen’s *Power at Play*. What these pieces have in common is their shared interest in the way in which the many varieties of play are often imbued with the dominant social and cultural values of their time.

**references**


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Work and play in management studies: A Kleinian analysis*

Donncha Kavanagh

abstract

This paper takes some of Melanie Klein’s ideas, which Bion (1961/1998) previously used to understand group dynamics, to analyse the discipline of management studies since its ‘birth’ in the United States in the late 19th century. Specifically, it focuses on the idealisation of work and play, and argues that at its inception, for idiosyncratic historical reasons, the discipline was rooted in a ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position in which work was idealised as good and play as bad. The paper maps out the peculiar set of factors and influences that brought this about. It then examines how and if, again following Klein, the discipline has evolved to the ‘depressive’ position, where the idealisations are replaced by a more ambiguous, holistic semantic frame. Seven different relationships between work and play are then described. The paper contends that the originary splitting and idealisation is foundational to the discipline, and provides an enduring basis for analysing management theory and practice. It concludes by using this splitting to map out five potential future trajectories for the discipline.

Introduction

Play is a capricious concept dragged hither and thither by its many meanings – Burke (1971) identified fifty-three different dictionary definitions of ‘play’ and thirty-nine of ‘work’. While some authors like Huizinga (1955), Sutton-Smith (1997), and Caillois (1961) have used this ambiguity to fruitfully analyse different types of play, I instead focus on the normative understandings of play (and work) within the discipline of management studies. In this essay, I consider how and why this normative framework and the relationship between work and play have evolved over time. The central argument is that, at its birth, management studies has constituted work as a ‘good object’ and play as a ‘bad object’, and that this has structured the discipline’s evolution. The terms ‘good object’ and ‘bad object’ are borrowed from object relations theory, in particular the work of Melanie Klein who provides a useful conceptual frame for diagnosing the discipline. The paper begins, therefore, with a brief introduction to

* I thank Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling who helped me on an earlier version of this paper. I thank Sebastian Green for his insights on Klein’s writings and for his helpful comments on early drafts of the paper. In addition, I thank Kevin Scally and the organisers of the Work, Play and Boredom conference held in St. Andrews in June 2010. Finally, I thank the editors and reviewers for the work (and play) they put into this special issue.
Klein’s ideas, and argues that some of her concepts may be usefully applied to the development of management studies’ identity. It then proceeds to describe how management studies, after its birth in the late 19th century, has moved from the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position, where work is idealised as ‘good’ and play as ‘bad’, to the ‘depressive’ position characterised by more fluid understandings. The paper concludes by using Klein’s perspective to assess the current and future status of the discipline.

**Getting serious: A Kleinian analysis of management studies**

A starting point for Klein is the notion of *phantasy* (spelled with a ‘ph’ to distinguish it from the word fantasy), which is the psychological aspect of unconscious instinct. Phantasy activity operates from the earliest moments and is best understood as the mental expression of the life and death instincts that Klein, following Freud, posits as primordial (Isaacs, 1948). According to Klein, the early ego – which Freud saw as the organised part of the self – lacks cohesion, and, while there is a tendency towards integration, this alternates with a tendency towards disintegration. The death instinct is manifest as a fear of disintegration and annihilation, which creates great anxiety. This fear is realised by the infant as fear of an *object* that is both uncontrollable and overpowering. Klein posits that the destructive impulse of the death instinct is projected or deflected outwards and is attached, through *projection*, onto external objects that must be attacked as they are dangerous and powerful. Specifically, the infant’s oral-sadistic impulses towards the mother’s breast indicate to Klein that the mother’s breast is an early instance of this process of projection. Importantly, this ‘bad breast’ exists as an external object and – through a process that Klein terms *introjection* – as an internal object where it reinforces the fear of the destructive impulse.

But the infant’s phantasy also consists of a *life instinct*, which incorporates a predisposition to suckle at the breast, which Klein sees as one of the earliest internalised objects in an infant’s life. Klein hypothesises that the infant directs his/her feelings of love and gratification towards the ‘good’ breast and his/her destructive impulses and persecutory feelings towards that which appears to be frustrating – the ‘bad’ breast. Thus, the breast is ‘split’ – a central Kleinian concept – into ‘part objects’: A good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast, and through introjection and projection both objects are internalised. The good breast, to which other features of the mother are soon added, provides a focal point for the emerging ego as it counters the processes of splitting and dispersal, and provides an early and primary part of the semantic scaffolding that the psyche relies on in times of stress. The infant finds security as the good aspects of the breast are exaggerated and idealised (internally) as a corollary to and protection from the persecutory, extremely bad breast. Moreover, the bad breast is not only kept apart from the good one, but its very existence is denied, which is made possible through strong feelings of omnipotence. Thus, two interrelated processes take place: ‘the omnipotent conjuring up of the ideal object and situation, and the equally omnipotent annihilation of the bad persecutory object and situation’ (Klein, 1984: 7).

Klein hypothesises that the healthy child moves from this ‘paranoid-schizoid position’ – characterised by hyper-anxiety, splitting, omnipotence, idealisation, and a hyper-anxious fear of annihilation by part-objects – to a ‘depressive position’ where the infant
becomes able to tolerate some of its own previously projected feelings, especially its feelings of aggression and envy. The infant begins to become self-aware, recognising its own capacity for destruction, its vulnerability and limitations, as it begins to accept rather than deny the complexity of the external world. Crucially, the process of splitting is mitigated, both internally and externally, through recognising that ‘mother’ is constituted by, *inter alia*, a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ breast.

Bion (1961/1998; Gould, 1997) demonstrated that Klein’s theoretical architecture provides a powerful way to understand *group* behaviour, even if the concepts were originally formulated to understand the individual psyche. Following Bion, I posit that the architecture also applies if we shift the unit of analysis again, from the small group to the larger group that is the *discipline*. In the discipline’s ‘infancy’ the same life and death instincts are at play, the same processes of splitting, introjection and projection are at work, the same phenomena of phantasy, idealisation, denial and omnipotence exist, the ‘ego’ is broadly equivalent to group identity, and states broadly equivalent to the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions may be identified. For instance, while he didn’t use Klein’s vocabulary, Strong was highlighting sociology’s death instinct when he observed that ‘the ordinary practitioner (of sociology) is grateful for whatever he or she can get, envious of other discipline’s success and haunted by the fear that if sociology were shut down tomorrow, very few people would notice any difference’ (Strong, 1979: 203).

Individuals are different from collectives and so one must be careful in extending concepts, originally developed through studying the former, to the latter. Yet, along with the work of Bion and his associates, others have found the extension to be robust and useful. For instance, Morgan (1986) refers to a range of authors who, collectively, underpin his argument that organisations are ‘psychic prisons’, while the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations (ISPSO) has provided an enduring forum, since 1983, for those using psychoanalytic concepts in and with organizations. And while there are differences between individuals and collectives, these differences should not be reified. As March and Olsen (1984) have argued:

> Whether it makes pragmatic theoretical sense to impute interests, expectations, and the other paraphernalia of coherent intelligence to an institution is neither more nor less problematic, *a priori*, than whether it makes sense to impute them to an individual (Kahneman, 1982; March and Shapira, 1982). The pragmatic answer appears to be that the coherence of institutions varies but is sometimes substantial enough to justify viewing a collectivity as acting coherently. (March and Olsen, 1984: 739)

One benefit of directing theories to a different unit of analysis is that it can provide new ways of seeing a phenomenon and/or turn our attention to its different aspects. Melanie Klein developed her ideas through focusing on those psychological processes that occur soon after birth, which suggests we might profitably turn to the ‘birth’ of management studies, if we are to understand the discipline’s current state, its growing interest in play, and how it might and should evolve into the future. It is to this that we now turn.
The birth and infancy of management studies

According to Wikipedia, ‘organizational studies is generally considered to have begun as an academic discipline with the advent of scientific management in the 1890s’ (Wikipedia). Even if one is sceptical of Wikipedia’s collective wisdom, and even if one might locate the discipline’s origins in the industrial revolution, there is much evidence to suggest that the mid to late 19th century marks the birth of management studies. For instance, Barley and Kunda (1992) begin their story of the evolution of managerial ideologies in 1870, while Eastman and Bailey (1998) start their story in 1890, as does Guillén (1994) when he identified scientific management as the first management model (Taylor published his famous article on the piece-rate system in 1895). Shenhav (1995; 2000), begins his study of the (engineering) foundations of organization theory in 1879; Wren (1997: xii) notes that ‘about 1880…the literature took a quantum jump as a result of the workshop management movement’; the first business school (the Wharton School of Finance and Economy) was founded in 1881; while Towne (1886), one of the first engineers to see management as a new social role for engineers, published his influential article, *The Engineer as an Economist*, in 1886. Significantly, all of these events occurred in the United States of America, where new infrastructure was being built at an unprecedented rate and scale.

While a ‘discipline’ is often understood as a branch of knowledge, I use the term to describe a group of people who focus, in a sustained and collective way on studying, representing and analysing a phenomenon of interest. The branch of knowledge is then understood as an emergent outcome of the group’s work, as are more tangible manifestations, such as educational programs, journals, academic positions and institutions. In the case of management studies, the evidence indicates that, while earlier writings and practices provided a rich background, the discipline first came to be in a specific time and place, namely the (mainly north-east) United States in the late 19th century. The discipline, at that time, consisted of a self-selected group of various spokespersons, philosophers, practitioners, opinion leaders, and apologists for the managerial class, mostly working in larger firms, consulting houses, research institutions, trade associations, employer groups, government agencies, think tanks, publishers, business schools and universities. Guillén’s (1994) comparative study of the emergence of management models in different countries makes it clear that the discipline originated in the United States, with its ideas and methods spreading subsequently to other countries. What distinguished the United States in the late 19th century was the development of large-scale enterprises, the concomitant emergence of a new managerial class and a new ‘managerial ideology’. In contrast, even though the industrial revolution of the 18th century was centred on Great Britain and had its own ‘entrepreneurial ideology’, British managers turned their backs on their entrepreneurial history – probably because of aristocratic contempt for commerce and industry – and rejected American scientific management until well into the twentieth century (Bendix, 1956/1963: 25-33; Guillén, 1994: 208). In Germany, the social sciences remained weakly institutionalised before 1929, while ‘industrial bureaucratization in Spain was some thirty or forty years behind in terms of the American, British or German levels’ (Guillén, 1994: 164). In Russia, the emerging managerial class was subjected to, not only the contempt of the landowning aristocracy, but also the strictures of government control (Bendix, 1956/1963: 199-206). Thus, a unique set of circumstances enabled a
managerial class – that is, a group of individuals – to emerged in the late 19th century in the Eastern United States, and, having originated the discipline, the Americans have continued to dominate the field right up to the present, as evidenced by current business school and journal rankings.

While there has been a long and ancient debate about the relationship between labour and leisure, work and non-work, the peculiar setting of the United States in the mid to late 19th century conspired to produce a quite idiosyncratic idealisation of work and play. Specifically, the discipline adopted a ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position where work was idealised as a ‘good object’ and play as a ‘bad object’. In the next section, I will outline the more important influences.

The idealisation of work as good...

The legacy of the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) provided the first and probably most influential take on work. Central to Calvinist and Lutheran thinking was the idea that hard work (and a frugal lifestyle) were at the heart of an individual’s calling and success. Work was virtuous, not only because of its social and material benefits, but also because it marked out the individual as one who was predestined to be saved by God. Thus, since the sixteenth century, Protestants have been attracted to the qualities of hard work and frugality.

As Max Weber (1930/2002) has well demonstrated, capitalism was fundamentally influenced by Protestantism (in its various forms), and so it is no surprise that it also influenced the nascent discipline of management studies, which was centrally concerned with analysing the practice of capitalism. While Weber was interested in tracing the link between Protestantism and capitalism, our focus is solely on the influence of Protestantism on particular conceptualisations of work and play. Here, it is important to recognise the enduring influence of Puritan ideas across the various forms of Protestantism in the United States, up to the present day. As de Tocqueville presciently observed in 1835: ‘…methinks I see the destiny of America embodied in the first Puritan who landed on those shores, just as the human race was represented by the first man’ (De Tocqueville, 1835/2003: 230). While Puritanism, as a coherent set of beliefs and practices, went into decline in the 18th century, we are only concerned with the Puritan beliefs about work and play which permeated most if not all forms of Protestantism in the United States during the 19th century.

For the Puritan, work is important, sacred even, because of the ‘ancient ascetic justification of labor as a means of giving the “inward” man control over his body. Labor is therefore a special instinct implanted in Adam by God before the fall, which he has followed “solely to please God”’ (Weber, 1930/2002: 59). This followed Martin Luther’s idea that work is both a service of love given to one’s neighbour and a duty of gratitude owed to God for His grace. This Lutheran belief in work as a sign of salvation was especially prominent in the period c. 1450-1730. For instance, Weber documents the influence of the English Puritan Richard Baxter (1615-1692) who asserted:

…if he is to be sure of his state of grace, man must ‘do the works of him who sent him, as long as it is day.’ According to God’s unambiguously revealed will, it is only action, not idleness and
indulgence, that serves to increase his glory. Wasting time is therefore the first and most serious of all sins. (Weber, 1930/2002: 106)

For Baxter, work was not only a robust protection from temptation, but it was the end and purpose of life as commanded by God. Even wealth does not exclude one from the ethical duty of labour: God’s command, which everyone must follow, is that each individual must work for His glory. In the eighteenth century, the German theologian Zinzendorf – who met Benjamin Franklin in Pennsylvania in 1741 – proclaimed much the same message: ‘We do not work merely to live, but we live for the sake of work, and if we have not more work to do, we suffer or pass away’ (quoted in Weber [1930/2002: 182]). In his parallel study on religion and the rise of capitalism, Tawney also stressed the place that work held in the Puritan ethos:

…the Puritan flings himself into practical activities with the daemonic energy of one who, all doubts allayed, is conscious that he is a sealed and chosen vessel. Once engaged in affairs, he brings to them both the qualities and limitations of his creed, in all their remorseless logic. Called by God to labour in his vineyard, he has within himself a principle at once of energy and of order, which makes him irresistible both in war and in the struggles of commerce. (Tawney, 1926/1954: 229)

The Bible provided a primary and enduring basis for this Puritan ethos, most especially St Paul’s directive that ‘he who does not work, neither shall he eat’ (Second Thessalonians 3:10) and the Old Testament description of a wife of noble character as one who ‘watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness’ (Proverbs 31:27). The Puritan interpretation of the Pauline principle – that an unwillingness to work is symptomatic of the absence of the state of Grace – was a clear departure from medieval Church doctrine. In particular, it ran counter to the interpretation of Thomas Aquinas, who saw work as necessary only for the preservation of the life of the individual and the community. Where this purpose is missing, the validity of the command ceases along with it. It applies only to mankind in general, not to each individual. It does not apply to anyone who can live off his possessions without having to work, and similarly, of course, contemplation as a spiritual form of work for the Kingdom of God is outside the scope of the command in its literal interpretation. (Weber, 1930/2002: 106-7)

More broadly, the Catholic interpretation of Aquinas was that asceticism is properly contained (within, say, the monastic context) and that it need not be extended into all aspects of everyone’s everyday life.

While Puritanism and Protestantism originated in Europe, it never became hegemonic on that continent because of the mix of religious beliefs. (It is notable that industry and Calvinism both flourished in Scotland during the 18th century.) In contrast to Europe, various forms of Protestantism – each influenced, to a greater or lesser degree by Puritan and Lutheran views on work – were hegemonic in the United States from the time the first colonies were established in the 17th century until the religious milieu was diluted by new waves of immigration in the late 19th century.

The emerging managerial class in the late 19th century appropriated and promulgated a limited set of Protestant beliefs that did not include theological and doctrinal beliefs about the Bible, God, salvation, hell, Church authority and the like. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish a secular Protestant belief system, and within this we are solely interested
in beliefs about work and play. Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) both influenced and 
manifested this transition to secular beliefs. Franklin’s father converted to Puritanism in 
the 1670s, and while Franklin moved away from much of the Puritan dogma during his 
life, he retained a commitment to the more secular aspects of Puritanism, most notably 
its commitment to hard work. Franklin profoundly influenced not only subsequent 
generations of Americans, but also Karl Marx who posited that human identity is 
founded on work, based on Franklin’s definition of man as a tool-making animal (Marx, 
1867/1992: 286). And while workers began to organise in England in the 1860s and 
1870s, in the US such organisation only began to happen in the 1890s, by which time a 
ew managerial class had emerged (Bendix, 1956/1963).

When the theological aspects are decanted out of Protestantism, what remains is an 
 ethic that celebrates thrift, respect for enquiry, individualism tempered by a willingness 
to subordinate personal interests to a concept of the greater good, and an enthusiasm for 
 mechanical and managerial skills. Not only did this ethic create the conditions for 
 American business success, but, as Hopper and Hopper (2007) describe in their 
 historical study of the link between Protestantism and American managerial culture, it 
influenced the discipline of management. This infusion occurred not least because the vast 
 majority of the US population was Protestant at that time. For instance, in 1850, only 
 5% of the US population was Catholic, while there are only 3 Catholics among the 204 
individuals commonly identified as the ‘Founding Fathers of the United States’ (Anon, 
2005).

Chandler (1965) identifies the US railway industry in the mid-19th century as an early 
and primary site of management innovation, and he also identifies Daniel Craig 
McCallum (1815-1878) as one of its first management pioneers. McCallum is 
commonly credited with inventing the multidivisional corporation and was an early 
proponent of organization charts and other management innovations. Born in Scotland, 
his Calvinist beliefs found expression in his understandings of work and management: 
two of his Six Principles of Management ‘sounded like something from the Shorter 
Cathechism of the Calvinist Church of Scotland’ (Hopper and Hopper, 2007: 68). He 
was, at all times, ‘a dour Calvinist’ (ibid. p. 69), and when he retired, he continued to 
celebrate self-abnegation and the work ethic in his poetry (‘work on while yet the sun 
dothe shine, thou man of strength and will’).

The workshop management movement was a second important site of management 
innovation in the late 19th century, and its focus on eliminating waste sat easily with a 
Protestant ethic that advocated thrift as an important virtue. Frederick Taylor (a 
Unitarian from Quaker stock) was the leading figure in this movement, and one 
indication of his focus is the fact that the word ‘work’ (and its variants) occurs 798 
times in his foundational text, The Principles of Scientific Management (Taylor, 
1911/2010), while the word ‘play’ occurs only four times.

And play as bad…

Thanks to Max Weber, there is a well-developed understanding of the Protestant work 
ethic and its connection with capitalism. What is less explored is the parallel disdain for
play that became embedded, especially in late 19th century America, in the collective psyche of the emerging discipline of management studies. At one level, it is clear that if work is good, then its opposite, play, must necessarily be bad, but the longer history of this idea warrants analysis. This history goes at least as far back as Plato who considered that play was a distraction from the real world of forms and was therefore inappropriate for the ruling elite. In his Ethics, Aristotle routinely lumped children – the quintessential players – with brutes and animals, as indeed did Thomas Aquinas in the late 13th century when he observed, ‘But children and dumb animals, in whom there is no virtue, seek pleasure: whereas the man who is master of himself does not’ (Aquinas, 2006: Q.34). And the long history of contempt for not working is also captured in the proverb, ‘An idle brain is the devil’s workshop’ which goes back to at least Chaucer’s Tale of Melibee in the 14th century.

The idea of resting from work has a long history, as illustrated by the institutionalisation of a rest day in many religions, based on the idea that recreation was needed to rejuvenate the body and soul. However, by the 16th century there was a growing disdain for play (as distinct from rest). In 1559, the Spanish Franciscan Francisco de Alcocer attempted to forbid or at least limit pastimes and such attempts became more prevalent as Puritan ideas took hold (Burke, 1995). In 1583, the English Puritan Philip Stubbes railed against most forms of game-playing and pastimes, especially those taking place on the Sabbath. In 1628, the English Puritan minister John Robison stated, in a frequently cited manual on childrearing, that,

there is in all children, though not alike, a stubbornness, and stoutness of mind arising from their natural pride, which must in the first place be broken and beaten down; that so the foundation of their education being laid in humility and tractableness. (quoted in Daniels [1991: 19])

As Tawney put it:

Conscious that he is but a stranger and pilgrim, hurrying from this transitory life to a life to come [the Puritan] turns with almost physical horror from the vanities… Amusement, books, even intercourse with friends, must, if need be, be cast aside; for it is better to enter into eternal life halt and maimed than having two eyes to be cast into eternal fire. (Tawney, 1926/1954: 166)

Specifically, the Puritans disapproved of activities that were exclusively aimed at providing or enhancing enjoyment, such as sports, acting and theatre, which they considered sinful (Brailsford, 1975; Scitovsky, 1978). Thus, by the 1640s and 1650s, theatres and playhouses were being closed across England. In America, the influence of the Puritans was especially strong, as de Tocqueville observed:

The Puritans who founded the American republics were not only enemies to amusements, but they professed an especial abhorrence for the stage. They considered it as an abominable pastime; and as long as their principles prevailed with undivided sway, scenic performances were wholly unknown amongst them. These opinions of the first fathers of the colony have left very deep marks on the minds of their descendants. (De Tocqueville, 1835/2003: 454)

At the same time, the Puritans did not equate all enjoyable actions with sin, as long as such actions remain subordinate to their utility; they become reprehensible as soon as they are practiced for their delectability alone. The people of God are free to use the things of this life... for their
convenience and comfort; but yet he hath set bounds to this liberty, that it may not degenerate into licentiousness. (The Puritan Minister Joshua Mood [1633-1697] quoted in Daniels [1991: 13])

Or, as the Quaker William Penn (1644–1718) put it, ‘The best recreation is to do good’ (Penn 1682/2001: 155). This concern about putting limits on play and non-work is a common theme underpinning temperance movements of all sorts. For instance, writing in 1892, Engels observed that

Next to intemperance in enjoyment of intoxicating liquor, one of the principal faults of English working men is sexual licence….The working-men, in order to get something out of life, concentrate their whole energy upon these two enjoyments, carry them to excess, surrender to them in the most unbridled manner. (Engels, 1845/2009: 128)

The implication of this is that non-working time, or play-time, should be properly regulated and controlled. Specifically, sexuality had to be eradicated from the workplace, and indeed it was (Burrell, 1984). One collateral effect of these efforts was that play, which is semantically linked with sexuality, was also expelled, making work ‘deludified’ as well as desexualised.

While the Puritan strict aversion to play diminished somewhat during the nineteenth century, a common Victorian understanding was that play, if it wasn’t sinful, was certainly not good. For instance, Yale banned all forms of football in 1860 with Harvard following suit in 1861, while Schiller (1875) considered play ‘to be the aimless expenditure of exuberant energy’ (quoted in Linder et al., 2001: 2). This contempt for play was also consistent with the rise of utilitarian philosophy during the nineteenth century which took the view that ‘[o]nly useful activity is valuable, meaningful moral. Activity that is not clearly, concretely useful to oneself or to others is worthless, meaningless, immoral’ (Kerr, 1962: 52). Play, in this frame, sits properly in the latter category. In The Decline of Pleasure, Kerr (1962) attributes the rise of utilitarianism to the usual suspects like Bentham and Mill, but also to people like William Stanley Jevons who, in 1862, crystallised the philosophy that ‘value depends entirely upon utility’ (Kerr, 1962: 48). Of course utilitarianism was resisted by the likes of Oscar Wilde who declared that, ‘We live in an age of the overworked, and the under-educated; the age in which people are so industrious that they become absolutely stupid’ (Wilde, 1891/2004: 85). But, in Kerr’s view, ‘These flashes of bravado are rockets fired by the damned as they cheerfully go down with the ship’ (Kerr, 1962: 93).

The notion that work was good and play bad was reinforced during the 19th century as industrialisation worked to separate work and play into opposing categories, or ‘splitting’ to use Klein’s language. As Burke put it:

The modern distinction between the ideas of work and leisure, like the regular alternation of work and leisure, was a product of industrial capitalism…and so the very idea of a history of leisure before the industrial revolution is an anachronism. (Burke, 1995: 137)

Separating work and non-work (whether this be leisure or play) continued throughout the nineteenth century and indeed into the twentieth. And the emerging discourse of management played its part in this labour of division, with Frederick Taylor (1911/2010: 68) famously saying that, ‘It is a matter of ordinary common sense to plan working hours so that the workers can really “work while they work” and “play while
they play,” and not mix the two.’ Even in 1922 Henry Ford still felt it necessary to assert the division:

   When we are at work we ought to be at work. When we are at play we ought to be at play. There is no use trying to mix the two. The sole object ought to be to get the work done and to get paid for it. When the work is done, then play can come, but not before. (Ford, 1922/2006: 106)

Ford’s distinction between play and work reflected wider bourgeois attitudes of the time, and indeed the distinction pops up in other domains around this period. For instance, writing in 1905, Freud distinguished between the ‘pleasure principle’ (the notion that people seek pleasure and avoid pain) and the ‘reality principle’ (the suspension of gratification and the endurance of pain because of the obstacles of reality) and, crucially, identified play with the former and work with the latter. For him, play was wish fulfilment through fantasy, and while this was necessary during childhood, in his view it was inappropriate for adults (Freud, 1905/1952; Riesman, 1950).

Thus, what we find it the late 19th century, and most specifically in the Eastern United States where the discipline of management was emerging, was the idea of work being idealised as a ‘good object’ with its opposite, play, idealised as a ‘bad object’. In effect, this became at least analogous to Klein’s ‘paranoid schizoid’ position. Importantly, Klein saw this position as an essential feature of the young child's life, but which was present at all times thereafter and might be reactivated at any time. Similarly with the group, in this case the group of individuals that constitute the emerging discipline of management studies: Their paranoid-schizoid position is centred on idealising work as good and play as bad, and continues to influence long after the discipline’s ‘birth’. As Greer put it in discussing the Protestant Work Ethic, ‘We have been brainwashed into believing there is a split between work and play. Work is productive and good; fun accomplishes nothing and is often evil’ (Greer, 1975: 165). Just as the ‘normal’ child moves, over time, from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position, so it is with disciplines. The next section examines how this move was manifest in the case of management studies.

Moving to the depressive position

If the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position is characterised by hyper-anxiety, splitting, omnipotence, and idealisation, in the ‘depressive position’ the child comes to tolerate some of its own previously projected feelings, especially its feelings of aggression and envy. As self-awareness emerges, the infant comes to recognise her own capacity for destruction and her own vulnerabilities. Instead of a world that is split into good and bad and within which omnipotent forces roam, the depressive position is characterised by an acceptance of the complexity and ambiguity of the external world. Most importantly, the infant comes to understand the ‘mother’, both internally and externally, as constituted by a loved ‘good’ and a hated ‘bad’ breast. And with the loss of omnipotence, comes a different set of anxieties; for instance, while the paranoid-schizoid state is powered by destructive urges, the depressive position is built on feelings of guilt. The term ‘position’ is important, because it emphasises how these states are not phases or stage, but are instead the primary bases for the psyche and the individual will oscillate between both positions throughout life. The theory also
provides an understanding of some mental ‘illnesses’ as an abnormal pre-disposition to one or other of the positions.

Bion used Klein’s work to present an original and perceptive understanding of how groups work. His ‘basic assumption’ theory posits three different modes of group behaviour: Fight/Flight, Dependency, and Pairing. Gould (1997) takes this a step further, arguing that Fight/Flight corresponds with the paranoid-schizoid position, Dependency with the depressive position, and Pairing with the Oedipus Complex. This opens the intriguing possibility that these positions and modes of group behaviour also provide an insightful way of thinking about the nature and evolution of disciplines (which of course start as small groups and then become bigger groups). Thus, Klein’s two positions presents an interesting take on how the discipline of management studies engaged with the work-play dichotomy since its birth in the late nineteenth century. Specifically, the depressive position is characterised as a move away from the idealisation of work as good and play as bad, to a more nuanced, ambiguous understanding of the concepts.

This more nuanced view drew in part on classical understandings of work, going back to the ancient Greeks, who distinguished between physical labour, which was demeaning and servile, and thinking work which was valuable and valorised. For instance, Aristotle makes it clear that it would be ‘degrading’ for the master to perform or even know how to perform the menial duties of ‘handicraftsmen, who, as their name signifies, live by the labour of their hands’ (Aristotle, 2008: 1277). This disdain for manual work is also evident in the etymology of the Greek word, ponos, which also means ‘pain’, while the Greek god, Ponos, is the god of hard labour and toil. Likewise, the Judaeo-Christian tradition depicts work negatively as something that humans are condemned to do to atone for Adam’s sin: ‘cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life’ (Genesis 3:17). These ancient themes re-emerged in the Enlightenment, during which reason and cognition – thinking work – again came to be celebrated, implicitly, in opposition to manual work, which was associated with toil and pain. Moreover, if utilitarianism depicts humans as pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding creatures, then work must be, according to Locke (1632-1704) ‘against nature’ (quoted in Thomas, 1999: 10), or, as Bentham put it in the seventeenth century, ‘In so far as labour is taken in its proper sense, love of labour is a contradiction in terms’ (Bentham, 1843/2005: 214, original emphasis).

These ideas also ran through the influential writings of Marx and Engels, who condemned the brutalizing and alienating nature of factory work in the mid-19th century. Building on Hegel and Franklin’s thinking, Marx posited that human identity is founded on work: ‘The use and fabrication of instruments of labour, although existing in the germ among certain species of animals, is specifically characteristic of the human labour-process, and Franklin therefore defines man as a tool-making animal’ (Marx, 1867/1992: 286). Man, for Marx, is homo faber, man the worker (retaining the gendered language for consistency). Building on this position that labour is foundational to human identity, he then argues that it is experienced as a torment under the capitalist system, which alienates the worker from the product of his or her labour. Work can and should be fulfilling, but capitalism turns work into something that is unwanted, and because of this work comes to be interpreted in instrumental ways, as merely a (painful)
means to an end rather than an end in itself. Under capitalism, the product of the worker becomes ‘alien to him and ... stands opposed to him as an autonomous power. The life which he has given to the object sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force’ (Marx, 1844/1964: 123). Moreover, this process of alienation has a significance that goes far beyond merely signifying his oppression. Rather, this process degrades the very thing that separates us from animals; dehumanizes us, degrades us to the depths of our souls. For Marx, this subordination to the object destroys man’s spiritual life, serving to mutilate the worker into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy the content of work by his agony, and alienate him from the spiritual potentialities of the labour process. (Marx quoted in Giddens, 1971: 57)

However, while Marx’s writings were influential in Europe, they made little if any impact on the emerging discourse of management studies, and, if anything, were seen to be in opposition to the discipline’s core beliefs.

Marx wrote very little about play and non-work, and indeed the general disdain for play is evidenced by the paucity of writing about it in the early twentieth century. Yet, play’s foundational importance is a theme that appears in the writings of some of the major figures in twentieth century sociology, such as Simmel, Mead and Goffman. Even though Simmel didn’t expound at length on the topic, he did see the primary process of society as, what he terms, ‘sociability’, which he argues is most manifest in play and in art. Sociability, he says, is the ‘play-form of association’ and like play ‘sociability in its pure form has no ulterior end, no content, no result outside itself” (Simmel and Hughes, 1910/1949: 255). Sociability is the seemingly ‘idle’, ‘pointless’ interaction for its own sake. It is society ‘idling’ in the very important sense of ‘ticking over’: It is its ground tone; its basic, normal running order. Far from being a trivial or superfluous phenomenon, sociability turns out to be the very essence, the irreducible principle of society as such. George Mead, another major figure in twentieth-century sociology and a contemporary of Simmel, also centred his understanding of the social world on play and games. For him, when a child plays she is observing and taking different adult roles, whether this be police officer, nurse, teacher, doctor or robber (Mead and Morris, 1934/1974: 150–60). In play-acting, the child is imagining herself as if she was another, and through doing so builds an understanding of both self and other and the relationship between both. This evolves further in the ‘game stage’ where the child develops a more sophisticated understanding of the self, as she comes to understand the network of relationships and roles that exist simultaneously, and, perhaps more importantly, those potential roles that exist asynchronously in her world of fantasy and imagination. Crucially, the game requires her to imagine playing the possible roles of a network of players and to play out, in her mind, the potential narrative that might, or might not, come to pass. Mead very much influenced Erving Goffman who built on the idea that play is at the very foundation of organization in his classic study, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Goffman, 1956). In Goffman’s dramaturgical paradigm, organizations are the institutionalized performances of actors engaged in dramatic roles. The individual person learns to assume a mask, or masks, that correspond to various social and organizational parts that they play. A carpenter – who is also a soccer coach, a father of five, the chairman of a tenants’ association, a Samaritans volunteer and a weekend homosexual – wears these different masks, and many others besides. The anthropological universality of this is evidenced even etymologically, in that the word
‘person’ is derived from the Latin word *persona*, meaning ‘mask’. The organization with its numerous roles – managerial, professional, service and functionary – is already prescribed for the performance, in terms of its settings, expressive apparatus, scripted roles, and the organizationally competent member is the person who, once appropriately socialized and rehearsed, enacts the performance by playing his or her part.

However, perhaps the most influential text on play was written by Huizinga who, in his seminal book *Homo Ludens*, argued against Victorian understandings of play and instead made the case that play was central to understanding culture and indeed necessary for civilization. Rather than seeing play as trivial, Huizinga argued that we should treat play seriously, because, at heart, it is elementary to the human (and animal) condition; for him, war, religion, sports and the arts are all forms of play. Huizinga begins his book with the bold statement that play is older – and hence more fundamental – than culture because animals also play. Play, for Huizinga, is essential, primordial and foundational: ‘Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play’ (Huizinga, 1955: 3). More recently, Brian Sutton-Smith, another major scholar of play, argues that play is primordial because advanced mammals use play to prepare and rehearse for complex future social scenarios (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

What is important about each of these contributions is that they problematise the notion that work is good and play is bad, substituting a more ambiguous, confused understanding of these categories. As Wilensky put it in 1960, ‘whatever split between labour and leisure industrialisation brought in the past, modern society moves now toward a fusion of the two: work, it is said, is becoming more like play, and play more like work’ (Wilensky, 1960: 546). However, when we turn to the field of management studies, we find that the social theory writings on play have had relatively little impact, at least until recently. For instance, Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* was only cited twenty-seven times by articles in Management, Business or Economics, out of a total of 939 citations (ISI Web of Knowledge search, November 2010). Indeed, up until relatively recently, management studies has had little time for play, which we can attribute to the enduring valorization of work and the discipline’s paranoid-schizoid position. This lack of interest is perhaps symptomatic of Rehn’s (2008) observation that ‘an important part of the management scholar’s self-identity is the capacity to position his or her research in a way that conveys seriousness, austere scholarship and the most po-faced interpretations possible of organizational events’. If this is the case, then the study of play is largely off-limits for management academics, whose work involves the study of work (not play).

But management studies has certainly taken a turn towards play in recent years. For example, there has been a move from hierarchical, rationally organized management structures to more informal and playful forms. Some organizations have institutionalized play times and fun times, while others, like Southwest and IDEO, have identified ‘play’ or ‘nonwork’ as central to their organizational culture (Costea, et al. 2005). This is how the design consultancy, IDEO, puts it on its website:

At IDEO, we believe in the power of play. It is an essential part of our approach: We use playfulness to design fun, inspiring experiences for kids (toys, games, and digital entertainment)
and to bring elements of delight to more “serious” experiences for adults (cars, food, health, finance, and more). (IDEO, n.d.)

Google is also well known for infusing play into the work of ‘Googlers’, where the work environment includes: ‘foosball, pool tables, volleyball courts, assorted video games, pianos, ping pong tables, and gyms that offer yoga and dance classes’ (Google, n.d.). Google’s ‘20% time’ scheme (a variant on a similar scheme operated by 3M in the 1950s) allows employees to spend one day per week working on projects of their own choosing. Other organizations operate similar ‘free time’ schemes where employees are encouraged to play with new ideas or turn work projects into play. This is especially the case in the huge gaming industry where it is common to hire employees whose passions and hobbies match the business endeavour (Kelley and Littman, 2001), creating a ‘labour of fun’ where the meaning of work and play is changed to the point that they ‘may soon become indistinguishable from one another’ (Yee, 2006: 68).

The observation that animals stop playing if they are unwell provides one rationale for infusing play into work. From this perspective, the absence of play may be a symptom of a ‘sick’ business: If all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, then it’s not what we want for GE either. A more cynical interpretation is that bringing play into work is but a further instance of the colonization of the ‘life world’ by the instrumental rationality of bureaucracies and market forces (Deetz, 1992; Habermas, 1989). Accordingly, the inclusion of leisure and non-work elements in the workplace is little more than a corporate device to keep employees at work for longer. Thus, the traditional divide between work and non-work is especially problematic in those organizations that are ‘greedy’ for employee commitment, where, as Fleming and Spicer (2004: 75) found in their study of such contexts, ‘you can checkout anytime, but you can never leave’. Of course employees are awake to this logic, which is why clumsy managerial attempts to make work more playful may be seen through and prove to be counter-productive (Fleming, 2005). Paradoxically, we find that play emerges in even the most inhospitable and unsavoury work environments, as Roy (1958) illustrated in his seminal study. Roy quotes Henri de Man, who, in 1927, observed that even in Taylor’s factory system it was ‘psychologically impossible to deprive any kind of work of all its positive emotional elements…the instinct for play and the creative impulse’ (Roy, 1958: 160).

The importance and value of play is a recurring theme in management writings about creativity. Here, the intellectual tradition goes back at least far as Schiller’s (1759-1805) notion of Spieltrieb, the play drive that unifies form and substance through artistic beauty, as well as to his enduring aphorism that ‘Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only wholly Man when he is playing’ (Schiller, 1794/2004: 80, original emphasis). Similarly, Freud’s exploration of the connection between children’s play, phantasy and creativity in his short essay, Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming (Freud, 1908) has been influential in forging an intrinsic link between imagination and play, because new forms of identity and collective behaviour can – and indeed must – be imagined in play. This link between imagination and play is developed most explicitly by Vygotsky who posits, in Mind in Society, that ‘play seems to be invented at the point when the child begins to experience unrealizable tendencies’ (1978: 93). The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi also studied the link between play and creativity, and emphasized the autotelic nature of play and
creative/artistic activity, where the direction of behaviour is completely inwards, onto the very essence of the activity itself. He introduced the term ‘flow’ to describe these playful, creative experiences and, in due course, produced a large number of publications on the topic, most notably *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008) and *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play* (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). In time, this stream of research and writing influenced the creativity literature in management studies, usually through making the argument that productive, creative workplaces should be fun and playful. Typical of this body of work are books such as Schrage (2000), *Serious Play: How the World’s Best Companies Simulate to Innovate*, Pinault (2004), *The Play Zone: Unlock Your Creative Genius and Connect with Consumers*, and Dodgson et al. (2005), *Think, Play, Do: Technology, Innovation, and Organization*, which argue that corporations should make extensive use of play, toys, models, prototypes and simulations to stimulate creativity. This growing literature has prompted and reflected the incorporation of fun, frivolity and play into everyday working life, as exemplified by the popularity of team-building exercises, away days, dress-down days, office gyms, etc. While this literature has certainly grown, it is theoretically light, probably because play is such an elusive and ambiguous concept, and because the literature relies on ‘several untheorised and untested assumptions’ (Owler et al., 2010: 348).

**Shifting positions**

The depressive position is characterised by a blurring of the paranoid-schizoid idealisations, as what were seen as opposites come to be understood in a more nuanced, ambiguous way. This focuses our attention on the evolving relationship between the concepts of work and play, especially in more recent conversations within the discipline of management studies. In this section of the paper I map out seven different modes through which this relationship can be seen.

First, play is understood as an extension of work. Here, the idea is that the values and practices of work should be extended into the domain of play. Play, then, should be serious, and it is proper to extend the work ethic of the factory to ludic domains, like professional (and indeed amateur) sports. Play, even recreation, should be organised, managed and subject to the managerial technologies and aspirations that diffuse out from the world of work. This category also includes the ‘work hard/play hard’ culture where the boundaries of work and play are blurred, but where play always serves the values of work (Fleming, 2005; Meyer 2010).

Second, play is understood as relief from work. Here, the division between work and play, which was a product of industrialisation, is retained, with play being understood as recreation *qua* rejuvenation. The extensive literature on work-life balance sits easily within this category. If work is idealised as good and play as bad in the paranoid-schizoid position, then this mode draws on an alternative view of work as an unpleasant, painful toil (a view that was excluded from early management discourse).

Third, play is understood as resistance to work. We find this perspective in Roy’s (1958) seminal study of ‘banana time’, where workers use play to subvert the monotony
of factory work. Similar to the second mode, work is seen as unpleasant and painful, but in this case play occurs within rather than outside of work. In this mode, workers use play to reclaim and assert their identity when work works to diminish meaning. In this mode, play can also be an important form of organizational misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999).

Fourth, play is understood as the usurpation of work. Here I draw on Sørensen and Spoelstra’s (2012) insight that play can perform an element of what would usually be considered the job of the organisation, but without the (formal) organisation’s consent. In such situations, play usurps work at the limit of work’s ability to organise, and through doing so it exposes the inabilities of the formal work organisation. In ways, this is similar to the notion of play as an extension of work, with the crucial distinction that it occurs outside of formal managerial discourse.

Fifth, play and work may be understood as autonomous categories. Play is an autotelic activity, meaning that the direction of behaviour is completely inwards, onto the very essence of the activity itself. Play is a form of activity engaged in solely for its own sake; it has no end other than itself, or meaning exterior to itself, or ulterior motive outside of its own terms of reference. Play, then, is axiomatically incommensurable with work. From this perspective, attempts to integrate work and play – such as Stadler, et al.’s (2009) notion of ‘serious play’ – are flawed because the two concepts are categorically distinct.

Sixth, play and work may be understood as integrating categories. In this case, while the distinction between work and play is retained (play focusing on emotions and process, work focusing on effectiveness and end product), these categories are integrated in the work setting. For instance, using MacIntyre’s (1981/1984) language, practices involve both internal goods (associated with the performance or play dimension) and external goods (associated with the measured or work output). Alternatively, the ceremonial aspects of work may be seen as manifestations of play (building on Turner’s [1969] link between ritual and play) (Dandridge, 1986).

Seventh, work may be understood as an epiphenomenon of play. The enduring and foundational nature of the paranoid-schizoid position within managerial discourse, means that work is good and play is, if not considered bad, evaluated in terms of its potential usefulness to work. This final mode inverts that logic, privileging play and seeing work as a necessary activity but always within an autotelic world of play, where the play logic, or the play ethic (Kane, 2005), is primary. A good example of this is Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s ‘Running Fence’ project, which consisted of 39 km of 5.5m high fencing erected in northern California in 1976 and which was removed, as planned, only 14 days after it was completed. As a significant construction project it required work, organisation and management, but these were at all times conducted within the play logic that underpinned the endeavour.

Each of these modes (except, perhaps, the fifth mode) questions and problematises the paranoid-schizoid idealisation of work and play within the discipline of management studies, and thus are best seen as articulations of the depressive condition.
Endings: Dying to play

This paper has used Melanie Klein’s concepts of the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions, as developed by Bion, to frame our understanding of the evolution of management studies as a discipline/group, with a particular focus on the evolving relationship between the concepts of work and play. This perspective provides a useful and playful alternative to other histories of the discipline, such as the well-known accounts by Barley and Kunda (1992) and Eastman and Bailey (1998). While I have drawn loosely on Klein’s ideas, there is much scope to use her and Bion’s wider conceptual frames to analyse the group dynamics of this and other disciplines.

It is my contention that the originary splitting and idealisation of work=good and play=bad is foundational to the discipline, and therefore provides a deep and enduring basis for analysing management theory and practice. Looking forward, we can decipher at least three possible trajectories. First, as discussed above, the old notion of work=good and play=bad has been problematized in contemporary writings about organizations, indicating that the discipline has moved from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position where categories and understandings are more blurred and ambiguous. A second trajectory is that the contemporary engagement with play has reached the point where we now have a radical reversal of the original position; in short, work=bad and play=good. A third trajectory takes the opposite tack, arguing that the contemporary interest in play is fragmented and marginal, and that the paranoid-schizoid position remains the discipline’s default position. Using Klein’s language, we can say that the paranoid-schizoid position continues to dominate, and ongoing attempts to rescue play, or to bring play back in, are always filtered through this primary semantic frame.

There are also two other possible trajectories. The fourth one recognises that while Klein’s framework can be usefully applied to groups and disciplines, this is inherently limited, principally because groups can fragment in a way that is impossible for individuals. Thus, it is possible, indeed probable, that the discipline of management studies splits, or has split, into different sub-disciplines with each following a different trajectory. For instance, a ‘European’ and an ‘American’ tradition in management and organization studies can be distinguished (for discussion on these traditions, see the papers in Organization Studies 2010, 31(6)) and indeed different traditions within Europe can also be identified (Üsdiken, 2010), though epistemology or methodology usually provide the basis for differentiating between these traditions, rather than different understandings of work and play.

Finally, a fifth trajectory applies another psychoanalytic concept, the idea of the ‘death instinct’, to the discipline itself. Here, the argument is that the only way to truly escape the paranoid-schizoid state is to, well, die. And indeed there are signs that the discipline’s death instinct is coming to the fore: Witness Jacques observation that ‘the last period of great vitality in organisation studies was the 1950s, stretching into the late 1960s. What has followed has increasingly been, to borrow an image from Yeats, the rattle of pebbles under a receding wave’ (Jacques, 2004: 62). Similarly Davis and Marquis, in their review of the field of organisation theory, observe that
With corporations, there is no there there – they are simply legal devices with useful properties for raising science… By some accounts, the imposing objects of organization theory have evaporated. No longer queen, organization theory may be more like the phrenology of the social sciences. (Davis and Marquis, 2005: 332)

Like Jacques (and Lounsbury and Ventresca [2002] and Levinthal [2010]), they look back with fondness to the sociological approach to organisations of the 1950s, when organizations were seen as sites of power struggles rather than objects of theory in their own right. Jones and Böhm’s (2004) take this the next step and assert that ‘Organization Studies Does Not Exist’, and that the scholars that now constitute the discipline hide a deeper fear of actually confronting the thing that is perhaps most in need of theoretical reflection, which is, that the very thing they hope to speak of has reached the point of no return. After Burrell and Morgan, and others, had opened it up, organization studies was burst asunder (with a little whimpering here and there as it gasped for its last breath). (Jones and Böhm, 2004: 2)

Wishing for the end of one’s discipline sounds like turkeys voting for Christmas. But Christmas does happen and the lives of turkeys, individuals and disciplines do end. And if disciplines are largely defined by their beginnings, it is important that we, the inheritors, now contemplate its end. Then, perhaps, we can truly play (and work).

references


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Playbour, farming and leisure

Joyce Goggin

This article examines the blurring of the distinct spheres that work and play were formerly – at various junctures and to varying degrees – thought to occupy. The article therefore provides an historical account of theories and constructs of ‘play’ and their relationship to what has been constructed as ‘work’, and ‘leisure’, and how these categories are becoming less distinct as the boundaries between them are progressively ‘deconstructed’. The author examines examples of the merging of ‘work’ and ‘play’ in a number of contexts including the current trend in management to introduce ‘fun’, ‘play’ and games into the workplace as a strategy to increase productivity, worker loyalty and job satisfaction. Also addressed is the concept of ‘playbour’, a term invented to describe forms of labour carried out in or around computer games and popular culture more generally. The article concludes by investigating the practices of ‘farming’ and ‘grinding’ in ‘virtual sweatshops’ where workers are engaged in producing virtual items for sale on the internet for low wages. The goal of this article is then to offer an account of how ‘work’ and ‘play’ have been defined at various key moments in thinking about the two, and of a number of potential consequences arising from current tendencies to blurring and merging constructions of these constructs.

Introduction

This article will discuss various trends in production and organization involving activities or modes of being that, until fairly recently, would have been experienced or thought of as ‘playful’, ‘fun’, or associated with a well-defined sphere of ‘leisure activities’. This is to say that ‘play’ has long been associated with notions such as buoyancy, gratuity and voluntarism, and opposed to a symmetrical set of definitive characteristics that supposedly distinguished ‘work’ as being purpose-driven, profit-motivated, and obligatory. We are currently witnessing a progressive mixing of these two categories – albeit in themselves constructs that have been stable to varying degrees over time – as well as the characteristics just briefly enumerated. The result is that work and play, to the extent that they were formerly thought to be stable, discrete categories have, in numerous contexts from office management to online game worlds, somehow changed places or come together to form striking hybrids. Importantly moreover, where aspects of what might once have been thought of as ‘play’ and ‘games’ are being made profitable or introduced into ‘work’ settings, a number of issues arise from the notion of ‘fun’ and its relationship to labour.

The cases on which I draw in the following are taken from a variety of areas and include ‘carrot’ rather than ‘stick’ practices in management that continue to be seen as
more productive ways of handling labour issues and increasing output. Such emergent management tactics have tended increasingly to favour ‘fun’, games and playfulness in the workplace as a means of improving productivity and worker satisfaction. Included in these tactics would be the corporate ‘cultures of fun’ that came into view as a management strategy in the early 1980s, and which aim at creating ‘a corporate environment that is conducive to fun, humour, and play’ such as casual Fridays and paintball outings (Fleming, 2005: 285). Other examples that typify the breakdown or destabilisation of the work/play dichotomy include activities that take place in and around online game worlds, such as the ‘fun’ drudgery that fans perform as they contribute their creativity in the process of surfing from site to site, providing servers, producers and advertisers with rich sources of data that both directly and indirectly generate profits for a variety of industries with an online presence or outlet. This last variety of work, performed by willing fans who do not necessarily see their input as being directly valuable, or themselves as being exploited as a source of free labour, is tremendously important to the production of entertainment industry revenues. And while fans who perform highly valued work while ostensibly at play are not generally remunerated and would not necessarily understand their ‘leisure’ as a ‘job’, there are equally forms of paid labour carried out in virtual game worlds that more seriously challenge prevailing notions of play. Where this last point is concerned, this article will address the recent work arena known as the virtual sweatshop, wherein employees operate under the ‘absorbing rigors of many contemporary games’ to ‘grind’ and ‘farm’ virtual gold that is then sold online at considerable profit by shop owners (Dibbell, 2007: 1).

The larger focus of this article also takes in emergent forms of labour conducted in playful settings that fuse what might be considered work and play by engaging subjects in interactive, immersive, repetitive actions, often intended to result in an experience of flow. In exploring how playful activities, as well as activities generally labelled ‘leisure’ are now being co-opted as labour, I want to take on board Henry Jenkins’ notion of contemporary convergence culture as an underlying factor in the phenomenon I am sketching out. According to Jenkins (2006: 4), convergence describes a number of effects of merging of media, one of which is the harvesting of new resources ‘through our recreational life’ and ‘deploying those skills for more “serious” purposes’. In so far as the notion of convergence culture implies taking activities that might be considered drudgery in one context, and situating these activities in a ‘playful’ setting or game structure, Julian Kücklich’s (2005) concept of ‘playbour’ is also useful in describing the convergence mechanisms that drive fans to engage in play that is highly profitable for the entertainment industries, yet is seldom remunerated. In this same light I will also have occasion to discuss labour performed in video games for sweatshop wages in countries as far flung as Mexico and China, that place more acute pressure on received notions of ‘work’ and ‘play’.

What makes the idea of working in video games, or creating a managed culture of fun so appealing is, of course, the notion that blurring ‘the boundary that has traditionally demarcated work and non-work experiences’ supposedly insures that employees will see work as an extension of their own volition and that more of employees’ ‘selves’ will be ‘present’ on the job (Fleming, 2005: 289). While this may account for why fun culture has ‘outlasted the typically brief management fad life cycle’ (Fleming, 2005: 289).
286), it is also important to remember that the boundary that has traditionally separated work and non-work experiences is one that may not be readily ‘erased from the collective memory of workers’, and it remains to be seen therefore, wherein the experience of fun resides – the activity itself, the worker’s/player’s attitude or orientation, or a combination of both (Fleming, 2005: 298). Given this, one of the goals of the present discussion will be to address competing notions of engagement, subjectivity and agency that come into view when the arguably incompatible realms of work and play are mixed.

Having fun yet? Play, work, history

The topic of this article necessitates a brief discussion of the point at which play becomes something more akin to, or at least less antithetical to work, and why, which in turn calls for a much-abridged discussion of the concept of play, its recent history and related notions such as ‘fun’ and ‘leisure’. This equally raises the question of how we know when we’re having fun, and how we know when we’re at play or at work, and whether or not this matters. It is perhaps self-evident that part of fun is purely attitudinal (do I whistle while I work, or get bogged down in drudgery?) and part has to do with the structure through which ‘fun’ is perceived. By this I mean that the requirements, demands and goals of certain kinds of games and play may be difficult and fatal, as is the case with war games that are not necessarily fun at all, or non-fatal and liberating as in digital worlds wherein the object is to gleefully pick off or ‘frag’ one’s opponents. In other words, whether or not something is playful or fun has to do with one’s attitude when approaching and executing it, as well as with the very conditions, rules and goals around which the activity is structured. Likewise, whether or not something counts as mere ‘play’ as opposed to work hinges not only on the question of wages but also on the question of agency: who decides when I will work? Do I have a choice? Is there a purposive goal such as writing an exam or building a house, or am I taking on an activity purely for the sake of my own amusement?

While the body of work written on play must always deal with the incredible slipperiness and perception-based relativity of the concept, one of the most comprehensive attempts at defining play and fun is contained in the opening chapter of Johan Huizinga’s (1938/1955) Homo Ludens. Here we read that play ‘transcends the immediate needs of life’, it is ‘intense’ and ‘absorbing’, it has to do with the ‘imagination’, it is ‘the direct opposite of seriousness’, it is disinterested, voluntary and distinct from ‘ordinary’ life, and it is ‘joyful’ because it affords a hiatus from the seriousness and difficulties of daily, ‘ordinary’ life (Huizinga, 1955: 1-19). It is precisely because play, generated through various games and intended to grant an experience of fun or buoyancy, is still generally if not consistently seen as the antithesis of work that I would like briefly to examine this issue from an historical perspective. The object here is to explain whence such perceptions of play came and how they have been constructed over the last few centuries, before discussing the expanding role of play in business, organizational and entertainment culture as a more radicalised merging of work and play.
A particular view of play, which assumes that it is separate, disinterested, buoyant, fun, voluntary and elevated above ‘normal’ life experience, has arisen largely from two important 18th-century works on the topic. Although philosophers as far back as Aristotle and Plato wrote extensively on the topic of mimesis and play, particularly in relation to music, painting and poetry and their capacity to imitate nature, the topic fell largely into desuetude until the publication of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* [Kritik der Urteilskraft (1790/1914)] and Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* [Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen (1794/1982)] late in the 18th century. For Kant, play is conceptualised as cognition ‘unconstrained by the cramping structures of human thought’, a form of cognition that offers the capacity to understand and to judge playful, aesthetic experience, free of interest, be it material or ideological (Connor, 2005: 3). In the guise of aesthetic judgment, however, play takes on a ‘serious’ role, as a constructive, creative force in contrast with ‘mere’ play [bloßes Spiel] which is informed by chance and contains the notion of plurality, undecidability, ambivalence, random oscillation, and arbitrariness.

In Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education*, the ‘play drive’ [Spieltrieb] is theorised as an aesthetic impulse that brings together Form and Sinn – the senses and reason – making aesthetic experience a particular, exalted form of reason. In other words, here again play is retrieved from its negative associations with irrationality, non-seriousness and mere chance, to be reconsidered as a productive and important life force. As Schiller famously wrote, the play drive is so essential that ‘man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man (sic), and he is only completely a man when he plays’ (Schiller 1794/1982: 334). By insisting that aesthetic play [Spiel] is not ‘mere play’, but the very fundament of experience, Schiller, like Kant, attributes a formative or more ‘serious’ role to play when it serves as a frame of mind open to experimentation and largely free of ‘real world’ consequences.

It is this enlightenment conceptualisation of play that informs Huizinga’s influential *Homo Ludens* (1955: 13), a book that did much to popularise the transcendental gravitas of Kant and Schiller’s accounts, whereby play is a ‘free activity, standing quite consciously outside “ordinary life”’. Play, wrote Huizinga, ‘intensely and utterly’ absorbs players in the non-serious, and has ‘no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it’, hence play is ‘autotelic’, and has no goal outside itself (ibid.: 13, my italics). It is the neo-Kantian notion of play which Huizinga reiterates when he argues for the strict delimiting of play within well-defined, ‘staked out’ and ‘expressly hedged off’ spaces, such as game boards, game worlds and arenas, wherein play adheres to fixed rules in an orderly manner and does not seep into real-world experience where profit might be obtained from it (ibid.: 14).

Writing about this same cluster of seminal moments in theories of play, Steven Connor (2005) has argued that, in spite of its metaphysical heritage, play is not a transcendental or trans-historical meta-phenomenon, but rather a construct that is adjusted and tailored to fall in with the reigning Zeitgeist and political economy of the place and time in which it was conceived. According to Connor, it is not surprising that, in the 18th century, play would be rehabilitated as aesthetic reason, while through to the mid 20th century, play was theorised as being rigorously and structurally segregated from all other activity, and as playing the romantic ‘other’ to industry, everyday life, and
economy. This conceptualisation of play as transcendence and freedom, emerging along with modern industrialised society, therefore takes on the sense of ‘non-assigned time’, or time not earmarked for wage earning. The ‘protective idealisation, even fetishisation, of the idea of play’ is, Connor argues, a reaction to the increasing financialisation and administration of our life worlds, and the ‘seemingly universal expansion of the conditions of work’ (Connor, 2005: 6).

At the same time, however, a progressive merging of play and work has been underway, and is particularly manifest in poststructuralist theories of culture that strive to show how binaries such as play/work that have been constructed over time, are being progressively deconstructed along with the notion that play be necessarily free, disinterested and removed from the ‘normal’ sphere of human activity. This, for Connor, raises the concern that ‘the universal law of instrumentalisation’ in the continuing postmodern era is capable of absorbing play, rather than looking to it as an alternative, so that play is made ‘a mirror of the growing regulatedness of what Weber would come to call the administered world rather than being an alternative to it’ (Connor, 2005: 7). Connor likewise muses that the supposedly characteristic ‘disinterestedness of play might provide the provocation or opportunity to put it to work, or make it earn its living like everything else’ (Connor, 2005: 8) and that, in ‘the administered world, a certain principle of play [has] been diffused through the system, such that play constitute[s] the rule rather than the exception’ (Connor, 2005: 10). This last fear – that play will be mobilised as work – is shared by Maurizio Lazzarato, who has argued that post-Fordist production processes depend on immaterial labour and the ‘extraordinary extent to which’ forms of playfulness such as ‘creativity, communication, emotion, cooperation, and values’ are currently being ‘put to work’ (Lazzarato, 1996: 146).

How much fun is play/work?

The gradual erosion of the separate spheres that play and work have been thought to occupy is, of course, troubling for many who fear negative outcomes, such as a world where we are compelled to ‘amuse ourselves to death’.² In Are we having fun yet? A consideration of workplace fun and engagement, social scientists discussed the effects of the blurring of play and work’s separate spheres and the effectiveness of organised ‘fun at work’ through interviews which recorded ‘reactions to… the impulse to manage play, laughter and amusement in the workplace (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009: 557). One study found that fun at work amounts to an enforced culture of ‘work hard, play hard’, favouring young men who are ‘less likely to have binding commitments’ (IGDA, 2004: 32), and who are able to work the ‘excessive hours, that are common in “cool” media

1 See also Fleming (2005: 286) who writes that the ‘boundary that has traditionally demarcated work and non-work experiences (…) has antecedents that can be traced back to the industrial revolution whereby home, lifestyle, recreation, and play were severed from the act of labor by the alienating routines of factory discipline’.

2 I take this expression from the title of Neil Postman’s famous 1980s television study in which he laments the ‘spirit of culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment’ (Postman, 1984: 4), which I take to be yet another example of the trend I am sketching out here.
industries’ (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005: 1) like Electronic Arts and other game developers who subscribe to the so-called ‘work as play ethos’ (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005: 4). Other authors found that ‘fun [at work] is regarded as a smokescreen for disguising real conflicts’, while some employees find ‘exhortations to fun oppressive’, and still others react with ‘compliance, discomfort, or [feel] used’ (Baptiste, 2009: 602). Few respondents to these studies experienced ‘light-heartedness or relief from repetitive work’ (ibid.), and the majority of interviews indicate that workers are generally cynical about ‘neatly packaged, carefully strategised fun with definite goals (…) high-octane humour (…) and a fun ethos’, in combination with ‘routinised work, high level control, pressure of conformity (…) fun and surveillance’ that ultimately seeks to ‘colonise identities’ (Baptiste, 2009: 563). This is to say then, that the encroachment of supposedly playful behaviours as enforced enjoyment and fun, remains largely unconvincing in the corporate sector – at least according to this study – and that employees who are subjected to such strategies do not entirely accept the blending of work and play in the office setting.

Elsewhere, however, there are forms of labour that can be co-opted for high gains from willing subjects ‘who are either uninterested’ in remuneration, ‘or unable to translate the social capital gained through’ their work into gainful employment (Kücklich, 2005: 1). Video game modders – fans who modify games and in the process take creative risks that the industry eschews – are ‘an important source of value for the games industry’ but are rarely paid (ibid.). By deploying ‘a range of techniques, from changing characters’ appearances… designing new scenarios, levels, or missions, up to radical departures that amount to building a whole new game… using various authoring tools’ (de Peuter Dyer-Witheford, 2005: 3), modders produce a significant amount of content for the industry that ‘enables an immersive play experience’ and is itself the product of such an experience (Sotamaa, 2003 cited in de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005: 6). The extraction of enormous amounts of work from ‘a skilled labour force for little or no initial cost’ relies on the notion that modding is a leisure activity, ‘an extension of play’, and is an indication that, in the entertainment industries, ‘the relationship between work and play is changing, leading… to playbour’ or a condition where ‘work is play and play is work’ (Dibbell, 2006: 294).

So on the one hand, employee reactions to corporate fun seem to echo Charles Dickens’ 19th-century story of a boy who is commanded to play and declares that he cannot play on demand, and that Miss Havisham ‘could hardly have directed an unfortunate boy to do anything in the wide world more difficult to be done under the circumstances’ (Dickens, 1999: 51). This is to say that Pip of Great Expectations and the corporate employees interviewed by the social scientists just mentioned share a neo-Kantian view or experience of play as being necessarily spontaneous, voluntary and elevated from quotidian toil. On the other hand, the equally out-dated notion that ‘everything to do with digital games is a form of play, and therefore a voluntary, non-profit-oriented activity’ feeds the games industry with creative product at no cost, as well as extended sales issuing from the free labour of highly specialised, devoted fans who are reportedly in it for ‘fun not for profit’ (Kücklich, 2005: 2-3). These fans are more like Tom Sawyer’s friends in Mark Twain’s 19th-century novel, rather than Dicken’s Pip because, unlike the hero of Great Expectations who insists that play must be voluntary, the eponymous hero of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer convinces his friends to whitewash...
a fence for him in exchange for treasured items, having sold the Saturday morning job to them as a form of ‘fun’. In other words, employees prodded to work harder with playful office management strategies tend, on the whole, to reject the resultant ‘fun’ as artificial because it happens in the work environment, yet fans whose work is tapped for profit or gain refuse wages based on the same perception – namely that work and play are incompatible – but end up themselves ‘paying’ like Tom Sawyer’s friends for the privilege of working because they don’t understand their activity as labour.

For Connor (2005: 6), the merging of play and work that seems particularly germane to the entertainment and games industries is also related to ‘(t)he fact that the leisure and cultural industries have their beginnings in the late eighteenth century’, which is to say that the separation of work and play at that juncture also led to the development of play and entertainment as segregated spheres which would become the leisure industries we know today. In other words, during this period of accelerating industrialisation and urbanisation, as more lives were becoming organised around labour that took place outside the home, a separate domain of leisure was gradually being eked out along with the idea that leisure would remain distinctly cordoned off from work, and could be colonised with various activities that would be seen as filling workers’ private sphere of relaxation. Hence it is the same impulse to maintain play as something separate, other and elevated that gave ample berth to the aforementioned ‘apprehensions about the fragility of the realm of play’ (Connor, 2005: 6) as well as attendant philosophical efforts to keep work and play apart, as discussed briefly above. Those who worry about convergence culture and the fusion of work and play might, therefore, ironically be taking up a modern, late romantic view of play in a postmodern world, and therefore coming to understand of the current trend to playbour as ‘an emerging form of labour exploitation’ and not a joyful, poststructuralist dissemination of ludicity (Postigo: 2003, cited in Kücklich, 2005: 2).

But there are subtler, more troubling ways in which any act of gaming in digital worlds could be viewed as work or, at very least, a largely unpaid system for internalising the disciplinary structure of regulated behaviours. As Shira Chess (2006) has pointed out, the disciplining mechanisms of games like Grand Theft Auto ultimately force players to assume the role of the observing, controlling authority as well as that of the delinquent criminal, thereby reproducing and reinforcing the model of power on which the Western penal system relies as described by Michel Foucault. As players progress through Grand Theft Auto, the game compels them to perfect valuable digital skills as a function of four disciplinary techniques, namely, drawing up tables and keeping an eye on the clock; prescribing movements; imposing exercises; and organising tactical missions.3 Through various in-game mechanisms players are disciplined and rewarded on the basis of time and their ability to navigate the game’s spatial order, hence as players become more adept at keeping up the constant movement and attention essential to the game, they are rewarded with more space to explore (Chess, 2006: 82).

At the same time, video games like Grand Theft Auto instil particular gestural capacities in ‘docile bodies’, whereby ‘discipline defines each of the relations that the body must

3 This is one of the central points of Foucault’s argument in the chapter entitled ‘Docile Bodies’ of Discipline and Punish, pp. 135-169.
have with the object it manipulates’, and functions by breaking down ‘the total gesture into two parallel series: that of the parts of the body to be used (right hand, left hand, different fingers on the hand, knee, eye, elbow, etc.) and that of the parts of the object manipulated’ (Foucault, 1977: 152-153). As Chess points out, Foucault’s description of the kind of corporeal discipline involved in institutionalised labour is remarkably similar to the skills gamers must develop, particularly in console games where ‘the button structure is not automatically intuitive’, so that games played on them ‘go to great lengths to teach the player’ to acquire the necessary automatisms (Chess, 2006: 84). Once the gaming subject has internalised these gestures, the two series that must be performed are correlated while the rigorous time structure of the game is relentlessly recorded on the screen. This constant pressure ensures that the player’s perception of time is altered by the experience of flow which designers strive to induce, and which, if successful, causes players to lose any sense of time and space external to the game.

According to Kücklich, fan-based playbour (paid or otherwise) that congregates in and around games is symptomatic of ‘the shift from disciplinary societies to societies of control,’ that led ‘to a “deregulation” of work in which the primary source of coercion is no longer the institution that individual works for, but the individual herself’ (Kücklich, 2005: 3). It is, therefore, ‘the regime of self-discipline [learned in games like Grand Theft Auto] that allows us to describe new forms of labour in the information society in terms of play’ (Kücklich, ibid.), which fits in with ‘policy and political agendas around the science of “happiness”’ and accords well with the ‘corporate agenda for motivated, energised and self-managing citizens’ (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009: 562). Similarly, De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford (2005: 1) see interactive entertainment as belonging to the ‘operation of Empire as an “apparatus of capture”’ and an example of ‘how capitalist development and technological innovation are propelled “from below” by subversion and autonomous activity’.

IBM, on the other hand, has also grasped the importance of the play element in work, and particularly the potential of video games to groom potential managers. In Virtual Worlds, Real Leaders the company claims that ‘online games put the future of business leadership on display’; a future that is ‘open, virtual, knowledge-driven’ and fuelled by ‘a largely volunteer or at least transient workforce’ that is self-motivated and comfortable with high risk and hyper-competitive, virtual environments (IBM, 2007: 5). Gamers are thought to slide easily into management because they are adept at processing ‘multiple real-time sources of information’ (IBM, 2007: 23), are comfortable in ‘leadership roles that are more ephemeral,’ and have no fear of ‘taking big risks that could yield big rewards’ (IBM, 2007: 27). In other words, gamers have already playfully internalised the discipline needed to work in businesses of the future and, like fan playbourers, they expect little job security and will take enormous risks. Here again then, the boundary between what would commonly be understood as ‘play’ and ‘work’ is blurred, making it possible for business to recruit employees who have been fully trained at no cost to the company, as well as employees who are not risk-averse and ostensibly expect little in the way of job security.
Farming and grinding

One particular form of playbour does, rather puzzlingly, seem to succeed as ‘“flow” thinking through playfulness’ (Dandridge, 1986, cited in Bolton and Houlihan, 2009: 561), and achieve something like a postmodern version of play that saturates the work sphere, and is equally perceived by those involved, at least partially, as play. I refer to virtual sweatshops, located in a number of countries including Mexico, Romania, and predominantly China, where agricultural workers are turned into ‘gold farmers’ in facilities where they ‘grind’ virtual items and power-level avatars in game worlds, which are then sold on the Internet. ‘There are thousands of (…sweatshops) all over China’, employing ‘an estimated 100,000 workers for ‘twelve hours a night, seven nights a week’, and yearly they produce $1.8 billion worth of virtual items for trade worldwide (Dibbell, 2007: 1). Yet, with only two or three nights off a month from the ‘plodding, mathematical precision’ of ‘grinding’, this job compares favorably to other work available in the country, as it includes ‘room, board, and of course, all the free gaming [workers] can fit into their hard-working days’ (Dibbell, 2006: 293). On the one hand then, the corporate employees surveyed in Bolton and Houlihan’s study concurred across age and demographic variables that play at work isn’t really fooling anyone, and that we should not be surprised when an overbearing emphasis on fun in the workplace leads to ‘cynicism, alienation, and resentment’ from employees (cited in Fleming, 2005: 299). On the other side of the world, however, these Chinese sweatshop labourers overwhelmingly seem to agree with one interviewee who explained, ‘(i)t’s not all work. But there’s not a big difference between play and work’ (Dibbell, 2007: 3). Yet another farmer on the same grind explained, ‘(i)t’s instinctual – you can’t help it. You want to play’, and one other sweatshop employee who was about to move on to another job when interviewed, explained that he would ‘miss this job… it can be boring, but I still have sometimes a playful attitude… I loved to play because when I was playing, I was learning’ (Ibid.).

One is, of course, tempted to explain this all away by reasoning that play is a question of attitude or disposition – that what makes a game playful is connected to the seriousness with which it is undertaken, or the wages one earns while playing it. Importantly, like the player just quoted explained, one can now be bored, have a playful attitude and earn a small wage all at the same time, which is certainly a different version of play than what Kant, Schiller, or Huizinga would have imagined. Then again, when asked about the downside of his job, one sweatshop worker also named the attitude of players in the games like World of Warcraft who are not there to earn a living. ‘Regular players should understand that people do different things in the game. They are playing. And we are making a living’, and then hastened to add that he felt he was engaged in both (Bowers, 2010).4

4 Curiously enough, although entertainment industries often bring ‘negative externalities’ with them (excess drinking, absenteeism from day jobs), residents of Lishui, China claim that a virtual sweatshop has produced ‘positive externalities’ and that ‘the town feels a lot safer ever since the emergence of gold farms and there are less unemployed youngsters wondering around looking for fights’ (Bowers, 2010). This, once again, is an unexpected consequence of work and play coming to occupy the same sphere.
The inverse attitude and conditions are perhaps best illustrated by the current practice of forcing Chinese prisoners to play games like *World of Warcraft* in which they grind out about ‘5,000-6,000 rmb (£470-570) a day’ (Vincent, 2011). According to one prisoner, the computers are never turned off and the players, who in this case unhesitatingly see themselves as workers rather than subjects at play, never see any of the money. In this last case, prisoners are beaten ‘with plastic pipes’ for not completing unpaid work quotas and kept grinding until vision blurs, hence none of these prisoners mistake their drudgery for play. Here again, whether or not one experiences ‘grinding’ in a videogame as a form of ‘play’, mild entertainment, pleasant boredom, drudgery or heinous enforced labour seems to be a question of context (the home, a sweatshop, a prison), attitude (playing gratuitously no matter how ‘addicted’ one might be to the game vs. being paid to play for a 14 hour shift) and agency (can the ‘player’ turn off the computer and walk away? Is the player/worker earning a small wage? Is the ‘player’ a prisoner?).

**Conclusion**

My purpose in this article has been to discuss what happens when, in predictable postmodern fashion, yet one more ‘binary opposition’ is supposedly ‘deconstructed’: In this case, the opposition for work to play. This is not to argue that the categories of ‘play’ and ‘work’ have ever been stable entities as opposed to variously constructed concepts. On the contrary, the very slippery categories of play and work and what they mean are perhaps best recalled by Pip’s attitude – that one cannot be commanded to play because play must be voluntary and have no end outside itself – and that of Tom Sawyer, namely that what is perceived as being fun and playful is a function of how a given activity is framed rather than anything essential to the activity itself. As a means of elucidating this question, along with the notion of when play becomes more akin to work and why, I have cited a number of examples from a wide range of topics – management, videogames, fan culture – precisely to illustrate the scope of this phenomenon. To that end, I have also provided a backward glance at the history of thinking about play beginning with the enlightenment and the industrial revolution and how, until recently, play has been jealously guarded in a sphere kept separate from work, at least in the west. What remains to be seen of course, is what happens when work becomes fused with play, or play with work, and subjects are engaged in interactive, immersive, repetitive actions that often result in an experience of flow, as in digital worlds. Can such a flow experience ever be qualified as play since it is hardly voluntary, whether or not one is paid for actions carried out while in flow?

In all of the cases I have mentioned – office workers compelled to have fun; modders and fans who provide valuable labour free of charge; workers who grind in video games for sweatshop wages; IMB’s future managers who are unconsciously trained for corporate life in MMORPGS; and finally, Chinese prisoners who are not paid and forced to work hard in video games – the equation between work and play shifts and blurs. Hence, in the case of farmers and grinders, play activity is almost immediately valorised because the loot is sold on Ebay for real money even though they receive only a small portion of it, while in the case of those who enter corporate life after an unpaid apprenticeship in *Grand Theft Auto* or *World of Warcraft*, the pay-off is indirect and
arrives later in the form of transferable skills. And again, in the case of those forced to work in video games, none of their labour is paid or voluntary, while those who tolerate office ‘fun’ ostensibly have the option to work elsewhere or to take up an attitude that is somewhat less than voluntaristic. This is to say that, like the concept of play itself, all of these modes of engaging with fun, games and leisure may be placed on a scale that would describe both attitudes and sets of circumstances. Modes of engagement would also have to be qualified in terms of agency and how much choice or ‘free will’ players, or workers for that matter, have to disengage. Given the subjective nature of the experience of play, as well as the variety of circumstances in which play and work are currently converging, providing a systematic account of the implications, problems and potentials of these different forms of blurring would require ongoing research over an extended period of time.

It also remains to be seen what the societal impact of merging the spheres of play and labour will be, and if the effects will vary depending on the activity performed. In this regard, Julian Dibbell offers some interesting predictions at the close of Play Money, where he announces the ‘emergence of a curious new industrial revolution, driven by play as the first was driven by steam’ (2006: 297). In explaining why this new ‘ludocapitalism’ now so effectively colonizes what was formerly ‘the vacant, vacuous space of play’, Dibbell takes his cue from Max Weber when he wrote that the pursuit of wealth, when ‘stripped of its religious and ethical meanings, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often give it the character of sport’ or, in this case, online games and other modes of ‘fun’ work (cited in Dibbell, 2006: 298). If we assume with economist Edward Castronova that Western economies since the financial revolution have been increasingly focused on the business of providing sensation, or that ‘the economy might usefully be considered an entertainment product’ or again, that entertainment ‘might be its core purpose’, then ‘modding’, ‘grinding’, and ‘farming’, not to mention the huge market in virtual items, should come as no surprise (Castronova, 2001: 176). We might equally concur with IBM in their playful musing that résumés containing ‘detailed gaming experience will be landing on the desks of Fortune 500 executives in the very near future’ (IBM, 2007: 32). We would then likely find it equally unsurprising that one gold farmer commented, that ‘the working conditions are hard. We don’t get weekends off and I only have one day free a month. But compared to other jobs it is good. I have no other skills and I enjoy playing sometimes’ (Davis, 2009).

References


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‘Creativity loves constraints’: The paradox of Google’s twenty percent time

Abe Walker

abstract

This article takes as its central object of study Google’s innovative time off program, colloquially known as ‘20 Percent Time’. This program represents a radical departure from conventional approaches to organizing the workday, and is quickly gaining traction in the technology sector and beyond. Under the directive of management, Google programmers devote 20% of their working time to independent projects of their own choosing. While this program offers the appearance of freedom, it is shown that 20 Percent Time actually has the opposite effect, intensifying managerial control and heightening exploitation. The paper situates 20 Percent Time in relation to existing literature on workplace control, especially labour process theory and the critical management studies tradition, as well as Derrida’s notion of the gift. It is shown that while 20 Percent Time is a crucial component of Google’s attempts to control their employees, it is fraught with contradictions that may contribute to its undoing. The paper concludes by posing some possibilities for resistance within and against 20 Percent Time.

Introduction

Theories of workplace control typically have little to say about freedom. The workplace is often understood as a totalizing environment, saturated with obvious and subtle forms of coercion, so the struggle for freedom is best confined to realm of leisure, or more typically, left off the agenda entirely. Yet emergent neo-normative control theory posits that freedom is now the defining element of the contemporary workplace. Under neo-normative control, firms encourage self-expression, embrace behaviors that would ordinarily be considered deviant, and permit employees a high degree of discretion over the structure and content of their labour (Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Cederström and Grassman, 2008). Companies like Google have created a work environment that resembles a playground more than a prison camp. But neo-normative theorists are quick to point out that this freedom is deceptive, for it operates as a cover for the intensification of exploitation, all while making employees believe they are truly free. In this essay, I offer a partial challenge to neo-normative theory by showing that workplace freedom has a tendency to extricate itself from the contractual social relation and reinvent itself in ways that suggest a more pure form of gift, almost in the sense of Derrida (1994). I conclude by arguing for what I call a strategy of amplification: The intentional misuse of freedom to generate more freedom.
The boundary between work and play is growing increasingly blurry under post-Fordism (see Kavanagh; Goggin, in this issue). Undeniably, the workday is being restructured in new ways that mimic the exigencies of the market. Nowhere is this more obvious than at Google Inc. which consistently ranks near the top of Fortune Magazine's annual ‘Best Companies to Work For’ listing (Fortune, 2010), and has become the darling of the business press in part because of its unique approach to integrating ‘work’ and ‘play’. The centerpiece of the much-touted ‘Google model’ is a provision that allows its engineers to spend 20% of their workday on projects of their own choosing. Colloquially called ‘20 Percent Time’ (formally ‘Innovative Time Off’), this approach has won the accolades of management experts and popular media commentators. While the idea of 20 Percent Time is not new (the electronics and adhesives manufacturer 3M has had a similar program in place for decades), Google’s policy is the first to gain such widespread attention (3M, 2010).

20 Percent Time is only one component of a unique and often quixotic managerial philosophy some commentators have labeled ‘The Google Way’. In an interview for the trade publication Fast Company, Google VP of search products and user experiences Marissa Mayer lists nine ‘principles of innovation’ that guide Google’s management policies. While the majority center around Google’s openness and willingness to experiment (e.g. #2: Ideas Come from Everywhere; #4: Morph Projects, Don’t Kill Them), others emphasize the repressive aspect of workplace control – especially #8: Creativity Loves Constraints. On this point, Mayer explains, ‘This is one of my favorites. People think of creativity as this sort of unbridled thing, but engineers thrive on constraints. They love to think their way out of that little box...’ (Salter, 2008) This reflects Google’s general approach toward innovation: Creativity is encouraged, but only within certain predetermined and fairly rigid confines.

This idea is reconfirmed in axiom #3: A License to Pursue Your Dreams. Describing the company's 20% rule, Mayer says, ‘We let engineers spend 20% of their time working on whatever they want, and we trust that they’ll build interesting things’. This is a loaded statement that merits some analysis. The two clauses in the sentence (‘we let...’; ‘we trust...’) explicitly frame 20 Percent Time as a kind of social contract (i.e. we allow employees a certain degree of freedom, but in return they are obligated to use it appropriately). Of course, the phrase ‘interesting things’ is deliberately vague, and Mayer does not specify the basis by which an idea might be judged interesting or uninteresting. So far from absolute freedom, Google grants its employees a provisional freedom which can apparently be recalled should their projects be deemed uninteresting. Managerial consultant Bernard Girard goes as far as to suggest employees experience this ‘freedom’ as a form of debt: ‘I owe something to the company because I’m given the free to invent and develop my own ideas’ (Girard, 2009: 67). Later in the same text, he notes, ‘what Google gives with one hand, it recovers with the other’, further highlighting the contractual nature of the arrangement (Ibid.: 66).

In the business and popular press, Google’s 20 Percent Time is typically framed as an example of corporate benevolence, a gesture of goodwill, or a gift bestowed on workers by enlightened managers. But Google’s gift is not a one-sided act of charity. Instead, as company profiler Bernard Girard (2009) correctly notes, the 20% rule is consistent with the anthropological concept of potlatch, for it establishes a debt that is laden with the
expectation of reciprocity, but can never be repaid in full. In this sense, it creates what Mauss called a ‘gift economy’. However, in Derrida’s (1994) deconstruction of Mauss’s notion of the gift, he argues that the genuine gift is *aneconomic*, that is, its logic is beyond – though perhaps not wholly separate from – the economic cycle. If the Maussian gift obeys a circular logic, the Derridean gift is open-ended and non-reciprocal. But Derrida goes even further, suggesting that since the mere acknowledgement of the gift would imply a sort of reciprocity, the gift must go unacknowledged by both the giver and the receiver. The pure gift cannot even speak its own name; it must not be recognized as a gift at all. The gift that does not embody all these characteristics descends rapidly into mere market exchange. As I will show, 20 Percent Time meets none of Derrida’s criteria for gift giving, because it is bound up in a contractual relationship between employer and employee. As Girard (2009: 66) notes, ‘Google’s assumption is that the 20% free time it gives its employees will be returned in information, innovation, and increased loyalty’. Google’s largesse is a carefully-calculated managerial technique which has little to do with generosity. Later, I will suggest that 20 Percent Time can only begin to approach the status of the Derridean gift if workers are willing to break their end of the bargain, and in doing so free 20 Percent Time from the logic of economic exchange. But first, I will examine Google’s 20 Percent Time policy in relation to the existent literature on worker control.

**Theoretical background**

Controlling or disciplining employees is a critical feature of all economic enterprises, and scholars of work have studied and theorized about workplace discipline for many decades. Much of the HRM literature assumes that managers have complete discretion over the organization of their workplace. Employers can locate their firm anywhere on a spectrum between authoritarianism and benevolence based their own personal proclivities. From this perspective, firms ‘choose’ how to organize their workplaces. Employers can embrace a certain kind of control regime based on their values and predilections, and then develop practices and policies to facilitate that choice. This *strategic* approach to workplace management has a long history, from the Human Relations School to Alvin Gouldner’s (1954) description of the shift from punitive to bureaucratic control in one factory, to more recent theories that emphasize ‘corporate culture’ (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). One of the most popular versions of this school of thought is Michael Porter’s (1980) concept of ‘high road’ and ‘low road’ employers. Porter distinguishes between high-road firms that offer ‘well-paid jobs’ that are ‘secure and satisfying’, versus low road firms whose jobs are ‘insecure and unsatisfying’, and he argues that companies can pick their strategy. Once chosen, however, a control strategy has important consequences for the kinds of people that are hired, the ways they are trained, and the systems of rewards they face. In press materials and official company documents, Google carefully cultivates its public image as a ‘high-road’ firm, and strives to create the impression that it does so by choice.

The work of Amitai Etzioni (1975) offers a variation on this theme. Etzioni identifies three control mechanisms intended to achieve a compliant workforce. *Coercive compliance* involves the implicit threat of physical sanctions to control organizational participants, and typically suffers from high levels of alienation. *Normative compliance*
builds a strong sense of ‘belonging’ permeating all levels of an organization, based on selective hiring and socialization of employees into a common culture or value-system. Etzioni (1975) describes normative compliance as a system that uses shared values – buttressed by rituals, slogans and symbols – to encourage the active compliance of organizational participants. This approach requires ‘that workers and their superiors share a basic set of values’ and depends initially on selection of employees to ensure like-minded people, followed by training and socialization of employees into company norms and values (Etzioni, 1975: 36). Expressive leadership and symbolic rewards also play important roles in such a system: ‘attainment of culture goals such as the creation, application, or transmission of values requires the development of identification with the organizational representatives’ (Etzioni, 1975: 65). In a third remunerative type of control, organizational elites maintain control over lower participants by manipulating material resources, either providing material rewards for good behavior or withholding them to encourage compliance. According to Etzioni, organizations adopt one of these control mechanisms depending on their pre-defined goals, with profit-orientated organizations generally adopting remunerative strategies, cultural and religious organizations using normative techniques, and organizations concerned with order resorting to coercion. As I will show, Google cloaks itself in normative garb, but the fit is imperfect.

A separate school of thought holds that firms develop new forms of worker control in response to historical contingencies. For example, Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda (1992) claim that American capitalism undergoes periodic shifts back and forth between disciplinarian and value-centric workplaces, which they label ‘rational’ and ‘normative’ respectively, and they identify forces that push toward one extreme and then the other. Early American capitalism was defined by the Fordist model of production, characterized by the assembly line, Taylorism, and strict authoritarian system of control. After WWII, Fordism gave way to human resource management, a discipline dedicated to producing a compliant workforce through less repressive means. Popular rebellions against workplace control in the 60s and early 70s were ‘answered’ in the form of participation schemes, ranging from the team concept to quality circles, which purported to give workers a measure of control in exchange for their tacit consent (Parker and Slaughter, 1988). More recently, as the dream of workplace control fades, boredom and bureaucracy have become the chief enemies, epitomized by the Dilbert comic strip and the Mike Judge film Office Space. Management responded with a variety of techniques designed to make the workplace more pleasurable and ‘democratic’.

**The failure of normative control**

Google exhibits some characteristic of ‘classic’ normative control, but as I will show later, differs from the model in some key respects. In a discussion that resonates with Etzioni, Slavoj Žižek (2006) describes Google as a ‘liberal communist’ regime, with more than a touch of irony. The tech companies IBM, Intel, and eBay are also liberal communists, as are Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, venture capitalist George Soros, and the prominent neoliberal spokesman Thomas Friedman. Žižek argues that liberal communists attempt to reconcile the advanced capitalist logic of the Davos-based
World Economic Forum with the anti-capitalist spirit of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (an amalgamation he dubs ‘Porto Davos’.) Under this rubric, the relentless pursuit of profit is allegedly rendered compatible with the Leftist dreams of freedom, compassion, and justice. Though Žižek does not share Etzioni’s language, he is referring essentially to the normative organization.

In an article for the French popular magazine Technikart, Olivier Malnuit posits what Žižek describes as the ‘10 Commandments’ of liberal communism. Most are familiar tenets of benevolent capitalism, but Rule 6 is in a class of its own and deserves special mention: ‘You shall not work: have no fixed 9 to 5 job, but engage in smart, dynamic, flexible communication’ (cited in Žižek, 2006: 10). Of course, Malnuit is engaging in a rhetorical ploy: Work has not been abolished – in fact by most measures global work hours are increasing. But if work as such has been made invisible for some, it has been replaced with new intensive modes of interpersonal engagement. This is a daunting prospect. While there is a long history of scholarship in the anti-work tradition (Black, 1985; Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994; Russell, 1932), none of these authors suspected their dream would someday be realized via a severely attenuated version of the Habermassian communicative ideal. Malnuit may as well be describing Google.

Advances in programming have eliminated much of the repetitive, mind-numbing work that used to preoccupy software engineers – especially entering large chunks of code. So most of what Google’s senior programmers ‘do’ is not implementation, but imagining and conceptualizing new programming possibilities – in short, the sharing of ideas.

Following Žižek, Google’s largesse might be positioned within the trajectory of corporate paternalism. Just as Andrew Carnegie built libraries and museums in steel towns and Henry Ford provided discounted (but substandard) housing for his autoworkers, Google’s Sergey Brin offers gourmet snacks and high-end espresso at ‘micro-kitchens’ arrayed across the shopfloor. (An informal rule specifies that no Googler is allowed to be more than 100 meters from a micro-kitchen at any time, as Wakefield (2008) reports.) Other perks at Google include 25 days of vacation per annum, tuition reimbursement at $12,000/yr, fully paid maternal leave for up to 18 weeks, and a variety of others that pale by continental European standards but are considered extremely generous in the United States.

But Google’s ‘liberal communist’ regime may have a downside. As Andrew Ross (2004) has argued, the ‘humane workplace’ often operates as a cover for the intensification of exploitation. Ross’s detailed ethnographic study of the early dot-com start-up Razorfish reveals that beneath the camaraderie, tech workers work longer hours for less pay than they would otherwise. This is undoubtedly true at Google – the employee cafeteria at Google's New York office serves a full dinner 4 nights a week, with the expectation that many Googlers will continue working up to and beyond dinnertime, and many of the company's offices offer on-site laundry rooms, haircuts, and gyms – virtually eliminating the need to ever go home. Yet at Razorfish, the spirit of ‘Porto Davos’ proved unsustainable over time, and the company narrowly avoided collapse. In Ross’s narrative, the bursting of the dot-com bubble serves as a literary turning point, after which the company lays off the majority of the workforce, largely
abandons new-age management techniques, and reverts to a more traditional control model.

In describing his three forms of worker control, Etzioni (1975: 7) cautions that employing multiple control strategies simultaneously proceeds at the expense of internal coherence: The multiple control mechanisms will ‘tend to neutralize each other’. The fusion of economic goals and normative compliance results in an ineffective type, characterized by ‘wasted means, psychological and social tension, lack of coordination …. [and] a strain toward an effective type’ (ibid.: 87, emphasis added). He suggests that organizations have a tendency over time to shift under the weight of their internal contradictions, to eliminate inconsistencies, and eventually move toward implementing a model with only one kind of control.

This was Razorfish’s fate. By its own admission, Razorfish strayed from its original humanistic ideals and moved toward a more traditional business model. Over time, the need for the organization to make profits and add shareholder value trumped its commitment to ‘good jobs’. To the extent that the company still portrayed itself as a socially responsible employer, it was deceiving customers, shareholders, and its allies in the business community. In this regard, Razorfish’s shifting system seems to be an exemplar of Etzioni’s theory of compliance and control. Following Etzioni, Ross predicts that humane firms will sink back into traditional model.

The rise of neo-normative control

But Google seems to have fared far better than Razorfish. Emerging after the initial wave of dot-com boom and bust, Google has enjoyed steady growth since its inception, which the global economic downturn briefly slowed but did not stop. If some normative firms like Razorfish drifted back toward regulation and repression, others moved forward, modifying the normative model ways that initially seemed to placate even the harshest critics. From the ashes of normative control emerged the neo-normative firm. In contrast to the normative organization, which suppresses individual identity in the name of a collective and internally-consistent corporate culture, the neo-normative organization exhorts the employee to express their identity and ‘just be themselves’. As Fleming and Sturdy (Fleming 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009) have argued, neo-normative control is in large part a reaction against stultifying normative control, which employees tend to regard as artificial or false. If the normative organization silences individual expression beneath a veneer of sameness, the neo-normative organization embraces the ‘authentic’ self with open arms. But Fleming and Sturdy quickly shift to a more cynical register, noting that the injunction to ‘just be yourself’ – even to the point of welcoming absurd and unruly behavior that would normally be barred in the workplace – is itself a cultural mandate: ‘Despite the enchanting vocabulary of “freedom” and “emancipation” on which the neo-normative control culture draws, such “possibilities” do not actually liberate the employee, but rather create new forms of identity control’ (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009: 158). Under the guise of reducing managerial control, the neo-normative firm merely foists managerial responsibility onto the employee.
Google is frequently cited as an archetypal example of the neo-normative firm (Fleming, 2009; Cederström and Grassman, 2008). Like other neo-normative organizations, Google's model relies on a heady and unstable mix of freedom and control. While Etzioni’s models of organization involve overt system of control, manifest in different ways, neo-normative management seems to portend what Fleming calls the ‘control-free’ organization, or ‘liberation management’. Permitting employees to be themselves is presumed to result in higher motivation and productivity levels. So liberation management offers a version of freedom that is never completely removed from the shadow of control. 20 Percent Time is a prime example of this tension, for the policy offers a measure of freedom, but one that is constantly subject to modulation. Employees are required to document 20 Percent Time projects, and the company has dedicated at least one full-time employee (the unfortunately named ‘Director of Other’) to overseeing its 20% policy (Yen 2008). Indeed, Google takes an intense interest in ensuring that Googlers use their 20 Percent Time effectively. As Iyer and Davenport (2008: 8) noted in a piece for Harvard Business Review, ‘These percentages … are closely managed’. Similarly, in an editorial for the New York Times, Google software engineer Bharat Mediratta explains that employees are free to form grouplets to collaborate on 20% initiatives, but concedes that these grouplets often ‘need guidance to make sure they are aligned with the company interest’ (Medirara and Beck, 2007). There is a clear sense here that ‘the company interest’ (the profit motive) ultimately trumps employee initiative. Even more glaringly, in a letter to shareholders introducing the policy, company founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page explain the policy in terms that highlight its restrictive nature: ‘We encourage our employees, in addition to their regular projects, to spend 20% of their time working on what they think will most benefit Google’ (Google, 2004b, emphasis added). This description contrasts sharply with Mayer’s previously mentioned open-ended depiction of the program (programmers work on ‘whatever they want’). The fact that senior Google executives cannot reach an agreement on the proper framing of the policy reveals its complexity: It is fraught with contradictions.

It should be noted that new forms of workplace control do not necessarily eclipse old forms. Instead, control regimes are often cumulative; a neo-normative model does not preclude normative or even regulatory and disciplinary strategies. For example, at the peak of the economic slump, one report indicated that Google had begun ‘firing slackers’ (Carlson, 2008). While this did not appear to be a widespread phenomenon, it lent credence to the idea that Google’s unique mix of control and freedom is a classic case of the iron fist beneath a velvet glove. Following this logic, freedom serves as a cover for more traditional forms of workplace control. But by most journalistic and popular accounts, Google exhibits very few signs of traditional repression. Even when Google does restrict employee freedom, it typically does so in a way that is consistent with its overall culture of permissiveness. Google has perfected the system of ‘positive’ reinforcement (encouragement) to the point that ‘negative’ reinforcement (discipline) is largely held in reserve. For example, Google’s system of accountability demands that employees submit brief weekly reports documenting their use of 20 Percent Time and share their reports through peer review (Girard, 2009: 66). So even the evaluative aspect of the program is decentered. All things equal, the neo-normative firm displays a preference for permissive strategies, without disallowing other possibilities.
While 20 Percent Time is just one component of a larger system of neo-normative control, it merits special treatment because it claims to be different and distinct from the workday proper. That is, by setting aside 20% – and only 20% – of the workweek for ‘freedom’, Google tacitly acknowledges that the remaining 80% is not (as) free. If taken to its logical conclusion, neo-normative theory would suggest that the entire workday should be employee-directed and ‘liberated’ from managerial oversight. Fleming (2009) offers a number of examples of firms that take the 'liberation management' model much further than Google, some even extending a variation of 20 Percent Time to the entire workday. The ‘limit case’ would be a firm with no control structure whatsoever – manifest or concealed – and that relies entirely on employees’ self-regulatory impulses, thus virtually eliminating the need for management. Google's unwillingness to go this far suggests something different is at work. A close examination of 20 Percent Time will allow us to position emergent theories of neo-normative control in relation to contemporary debates about worktime.

**Time and measure**

According to Google’s official narrative, there is a seamless link between its need for innovation and its employees’ creative impulses. In promotional materials, the company boasts that the policy offers its engineers the ‘freedom to work on what they’re really passionate about’ (Google, 2010). Yet a more cynical observer might describe the dynamic at work as recuperation. In this sense, Innovative Time Off is a cynical response to well-documented ‘problems’ of stolen time, self-reduction, and ‘skiving’ among tech workers (Schoneboom, 2007). Rather than penalizing its tech workers for wasting time on independent pursuits, Google reintegrates and revalorizes its employees’ anti-work tendencies. This fact is compounded by the reality that virtually all of Google’s full-time (non-contracted) engineers are salaried employees without set schedules. So the very notion of ‘paid time off’ is far less meaningful than it would be for a waged worker (whose income is solely dependent on the number of hours worked). While Iyer and Davenport (2008: 7) express concern that ‘As people spend more time experimenting, productivity in operational areas may suffer’, they fail to recognize that work at Google is not a zero-sum game. In the most pessimistic scenario, 20 Percent Time might simply be a tool for generating absolute surplus value by lengthening the engineers’ workday.

Here we see what Gibson Burrell has called ‘the difference between non-work and work’ (cited in Korczynski, Hodson, and Edwards, 2006: 172). 20 Percent Time is presented as leisure, but is already imbued with that which is deferred – i.e. work. As Burrell notes, ‘Whatever is submerged, whatever is deferred, whatever is relegated to the other side of the line, then comes to play a role in constituting that which is left inside’ (Ibid: 171). Google engineers are performing leisure which is always-already interpellated by its opposite. Google’s model may offer a preview of a capitalist ‘end-game’ in which work – disguised as play – becomes all-consuming. On the one hand, 20 Percent Time represents the formal subsumption of non-work activity (‘recreational’ programming) by the Googleplex. On the other, 20 Percent Time represents a radical reorganization of the labour process itself (i.e. real subsumption) through the reappropriation of the collective knowledge of the general intellect. As capital strives to
revalorize the creativity that would otherwise be lost to leisure, it simultaneously restructures the labour process in response to the refusal of work. Of course, as Carlo Vercellone (2007) has noted, real and formal subsumption are not mutually exclusive categories, but here they operate in tandem with striking results.

In 20 Percent Time, there is a distant echo of the early shorter hours movement, which demanded: ‘8 hours for work, 8 hours for sleep, 8 hours for what we will’. The problem is that shorter hours movement of the early twentieth century conceived of leisure as a bounded domain – completely distinct from work, and in an antagonistic relation to work (Hunnicutt, 1988). This may have had meaning 100 years ago, but it no longer makes much sense, especially for tech employees, for whom the work-place is essentially unbounded by time and space. One disgruntled former employee notes in a blog post, ‘my experience was that the people who spent all their time at Google were the ones that ended up on the sexier projects or in charge of things. It was frowned upon to leave right after dinner’ (Arrington, 2009). The same employee writes, ‘mgmt always stressed on “Putting some Extra Effort” – in other words “Spending some extra hours”’ (Ibid.). In the most pessimistic scenario, 20 Percent Time might simply be a tool for generating absolute surplus value by lengthening the engineers’ workday.

Examined in this historical context, Google’s 20 Percent Time initially appears as nothing more than a variation on time-honored traditions. The idea that periodic breaks boost employee productivity has long been management doxa. Indeed, early advocates for shorter hours in the United States claimed that a shorter working day would boost productivity by allowing employees time to recuperate, then work faster (Hunnicutt, 1988). Likewise, defenders of recess for schoolchildren claim that the remaining hours will be more worthwhile if the students have a chance to run around (International Play Association, 2010). An American company known as MetroNaps charges businessmen $14 for a 20-minute nap in a special chair, arguing, ‘Good quality sleep improves health, safety, productivity and ultimately the bottom line’ (Metronaps, 2010). There is widespread consensus, supported by scientific research, that time off improves worker satisfaction.

But innovative time off, as opposed to traditional time off, may represent a new, more advanced stage of worker control, because there is an explicit expectation that the time off will itself be productive. Unlike Google’s famed on-site masseuses and free catered meals, this is no standard employee perk. It has already become abundantly clear that Google has the capacity to re-monetize this ‘lost’ time. A Google vice-president recently claimed that half of new Google ‘products’ emerge from its 20 Percent Time, citing Gmail, the social networking service Orkut, and the ‘reality browser’ Google Goggles (Miraclemart, 2006). A post on official company blog titled ‘Google’s 20 Percent Time in Action’ glowingly describes a simple keyboard shortcut for Google's RSS reader application that originated in 20 Percent Time Time (K, 2006). So even though there is no formal requirement that Googlers spend their 20 Percent Time on marketable projects, the internal company culture clearly encourages the type of work that might eventually pay off – and Google is eager to brag about those projects that do. With only a hint of exaggeration, Eric Schmidt has written ‘Virtually everything new seems to come from the 20% of their time engineers here are expected to spend on side
projects. They certainly don't come out of the management team’ (Google Operating System, 2005).

The demand that these employees ‘innovate’ in their time off is somewhat ironic given that innovation is already their job description. One Googler describes 20 Percent Time as an obligation that compounds, rather than replaces, his ordinary responsibilities: ‘This isn’t a matter of doing something in your spare time, but more of actively making time for it’ (Iyer and Davenport, 2008: 64). Since Googlers are paid on a salary basis, the amount of time that might be dedicated to a particular task is theoretically unlimited. Likewise, the length of the workday is limited only by the corporeal body's inherent demand for rest and sustenance. Most people would be incapable of working more than a 14-hour day, although anecdotal accounts indicate that some Googlers approach this threshold. With multiple tasks all on limitless timetables, the notion of ‘free’ or ‘spare’ time is almost meaningless. So taking innovative time off either means pushing tasks aside to make room, or extending the workday by 20%. Later, the same employee notes, ‘Heck, I don’t have a good 20% project yet and I need one. If I don’t come up with something I’m sure it could negatively impact my review.’ (Ibid: 64). Googlers face intense pressure to design ‘good’ projects, and lack of initiative could potentially be a black mark on one’s record. In the company's own words, it ‘requires engineers to spend a day a week on projects that interest them, unrelated to their day jobs’ (Google, 2004a, emphasis added). The somewhat awkward use of ‘requires’ (rather than ‘permits’ or ‘encourages’) lays bare the company’s intentions.

The Google model

To be fair, Google’s model has achieved some measure of success: The firm ranks high on employee satisfaction surveys, and many Google employees express nearly unbridled affection for their employer. Herbert Marcuse (1955) argued that capitalism can never satisfy humankind’s erotic needs, because Eros (leisure and pleasure) is always subordinated to alienated labour. But capital has sought to resolve this contradiction, by making work both less alienating and more erotic. Moreover, experiments with what Marcuse would call ‘non-alienated’ labour, whether under the Spanish Popular Front (Seidman, 1991) or through worker-owned cooperatives (Kasmir, 1996) have rarely lived up to their idealistic promise. At Google, Eros and alienated labour have been successfully integrated, with striking results. A job announcement webpage proclaims, ‘We love our employees, and we want them to know it’ (Google, 2010). A Google employee writing for the official company blog opens with the line ‘I love my job’ (K, 2006). A popular company profile coos ‘if you enable people to follow their passions, they’ll as much as work for free’ (Jarvis, 2009: 239). Another employee tells ABC News, ‘When you’re passionate about something and it’s an idea you believe in, you’re bound to work harder on it’ (Hayes 2008). While love is a common theme in new management rhetoric (Andersen and Born, 2008) the explicit linking of love with the intensification of work is perhaps a singular phenomenon. Love discourse is typically employed in ways that mask its relationship to speed-up and make it appear ‘unconditional’; at Google, the compulsory function of love requires no veiling.
If we accept Hardt and Negri’s (2000) contention that ‘cognitive labour’ is at the cutting edge of the global work regime under late capitalism, Google would seem to be on the cutting edge of the cutting edge, given its leading role within the tech industry. As Fleming (2009: 106) notes, ‘the Google approach has become the pin-up case for the advantages gained when the employees can “just be themselves” within the confines of the for-profit firm’. And within Google, engineers and programmers are the most prized employees. But if Google engineers are the avant-garde of the working class, the rest of industry is catching up quickly.

As Google gains notoriety, there has been a spate of books on the company’s unique management practices. Jeff Jarvis’ (2009) book *What Would Google Do?* is perhaps the most popular, ranked among the top 50 bestselling ‘company profiles’ on Amazon a full 18 months after its original publication. (The title is a play on the ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ (WWJD) slogan which appears on bumper stickers and t-shirts in the United States). Jarvis’s book is aimed at the managerial strata, and his explicit recommendation is that they should model their companies after Google. It is no accident that Google substitutes for Divine Providence in this formulation. True to form, Jarvis treats his subject with a near-religious reverence, carefully avoiding opportunities to be critical. In the final section of the book, entitled ‘If Google Ruled the World’ Jarvis imagines what the world would be like if Google took over private industries and public services. Under subheadings like ‘St. Google’s Hospital’, ‘Google Power & Light’, and ‘The First Bank of Google’, Jarvis (2009) describes a Google-ized world with giddy enthusiasm. Far from a nightmare scenario, Jarvis takes the position that a world ruled by Google would represent a vast improvement over the current mix of public and private control. With Google’s recent entry into the telecom industry, many of these scenarios don’t seem particularly far-fetched.

In their Harvard Business Review piece, Davenport and Iyer speak fondly of Google’s 20 Percent Time. For these authors, the only problem is that the 20% requirement has not been extended to enough workers. They recommend that this discretionary time should be expanded to include ‘nontechnical’ and ‘nonmanagerial’ employees (Iver and Davenport, 2008: 8). (They might have added ‘contracted’ and ‘hourly’ employees to this list, as these workers are these workers typically do not receive a 20% benefit, particularly when they work offsite.) 20 Percent Time is increasingly viewed as a model that can be extrapolated to other workplaces. ABC News claims that adopting 20 Percent Time at a ‘could make corporate America more productive’ (Hayes, 2008). The technology blog Web Worker Daily, which primarily caters to freelance and contracted workers who make up the bulk of online content providers, urges its readers to participate in their own self-management and self-regulation and ‘mix up the workweek’ by ‘setting your own 20 Percent Time’. But Web Worker Daily breaks with Google in one important way. At the end of the short article, the author makes a recommendation that would be anathema at Google. The author instructs readers to ‘mark the end of your workday. Only by setting actual work hours can we draw a clear line between work and the rest of our preoccupations’ (Roque, 2010). The irony, of course, is that few if any freelance web workers self-impose an arbitrary schedule – like Googlers, their work hours vary widely depending on the availability of assignments, other obligations, and personal preferences. A commenter on same blog helpfully points out ‘Highly productive employees will usually manage to fit this 20 Percent Time into..."
their day – regardless of whether it is condoned by the company or not’. If these signs are taken seriously, 20 Percent Time may soon become far more pervasive.

**Becomings**

In summary, 20 Percent Time is presented as pure freedom, but it is experienced as provisional freedom. If neo-normative management control styles purport to correct the stifling impulse toward conformity of normative control, they may only intensify it, all under the guise of doing the opposite. At minimum, 20 Percent Time appears to reduce if not eliminate the problem of slacking. At a different company that implemented 20 Percent (inspired by Google’s example), a manager gloated, ‘People are way more efficient about 20 Percent Time than regular work time. They say, “I’m not going to [expletive]ing do anything like read newsfeeds or do Facebook”’ (Pink, 2011: 95). In an echo of Foucault, it seems a self-disciplinary regime is far more efficient that either an overt regulatory regime (Taylorism) or an overt cultural mechanism (normative control). One Google employee explicitly compares 20 Percent Time to self-management: ‘People are productive when they are working on things they see as important or they have invented, or are working on something they are passionate about. It is like they are the CEO of their own little company’ (Vise and Malseed, 2009: 132). A CEO would presumably take much more interest in the fate of their incipient enterprise, than would a disinterested employee. But it may be that offering employees a taste of freedom in the form of 20 Percent Time only increases their yearning for real freedom.

Alternatively, some workers may actually be willing to sacrifice perks and quasi-freedom for good pay, even if coupled with a more conventional disciplinary structure. Cederström and Grassman (2009) suggest that employees may prefer a model where management’s intentions – no matter how pernicious – are laid bare to one that seems modeled on an elaborate lie. One disgruntled Google employee seems to confirm this view, writing on an internet message board:

> As a full-time employee I prefer a good salary to gradually evaporating fringe benefits... My twenty-two year old greedy magpie self was wholly drawn in by the idea of having sashimi anytime I wanted without paying a dime. But as nice as it is having a cushy 401K and unlimited sick days, I was not willing to sacrifice my personal happiness and career fulfillment, not even for all the free kombucha I could drink. (Arrington, 2009)

On the balance, Google employees might choose to forgo incentives and benefits like 20 Percent Time in exchange for traditional bread-and-butter demands like higher pay and shorter hours.

The remainder of the article will sketch out some tentative possibilities for resistance within and against 20 Percent Time. Neo-normative theorists have relatively little to say about resistance, but like all theories of workplace control, their model begins from the assumption that resistance is a constant and persistent feature of any capitalist enterprise. If outright resistance is rarely visible in the neo-normative workplace, it is only because these firms employ practices that are normally coded as non-work – self-expression, play, ‘fun’, freedom itself – and recode them as work or otherwise.
reintegrate them into the workday. Yet even as the high-tech sector continues to expand, programmers and engineers are overwhelmingly non-unionized in the United States. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, unions represent only 2% of workers in ‘computer systems design’ and ‘software publishing’ (the job titles that most closely reflect the work performed by Google programmers), compared to 9% of workers throughout private industry (BLS, 2010). In the United States, the most successful effort to date to organize programmers is the WashTech union, sponsored and financially supported by the Communication Workers of American (CWA). WashTech operates primarily on the model of a ‘workers center’, avoiding formal contracts in favor of advocacy work and legislative campaigns (WashTech, 2010). While their initial base was Microsoft's ‘permatemps’ (long-term ‘temporary’ workers), they have since expanded to workers at 90 unique firms. However, their reach does not extend to San Francisco Bay Area, where the highest concentration of tech firms is now located, nor does it include many full-time non-contracted workers (the subset of Google’s workers who are granted 20 Percent Time). Indeed, Google employees have never seriously entertained the prospect of unionization, nor has any US union attempted to organize the company.

In his famous ‘Postscript on control societies’, Gilles Deleuze forecasts an ominous future for trade unions:

> tied to the whole of their history of struggle against the disciplines or within the spaces of enclosure, will they be able to adapt themselves or will they give way to new forms of resistance against the societies of control? (Deleuze, 1995: 182)

One thing is certain: To the extent that unions are predicated on the ‘work-place’ and the ‘work-day’ as known quantities, the old trade unionism has no resonance in the technology industries. Indeed, much of Marxist theory rests on the assumption that workers experience exploitation as individuals, and that the rate of exploitation (as a unit of time) can be calculated on a per-worker basis. Yet this calculation breaks down when dealing with cybertime and posthuman bodies (Clough et al., 2007). It may be the case, therefore, that old forms of resistance are obsolete. For Fleming and Sturdy (2009), the preferred mode of resistance against the simulated individuation of neo-normative control is via a return to the collective. A solidaristic response might be ideal, but at present, traditional forms of collective action do not seem to have much resonance in the high-tech sector. The answer may lie not in collapsing the individual back into the collective, but by extending the logic of self-expression to its natural conclusion. At present, Google only allows transgressions which do not fundamentally call the corporate culture into question. In a culture that nurtures transgressive behavior, the only bad subject is the one who exceeds the limits of ‘acceptable’ transgression.

How would Googlers refuse to return the ‘gift’? How might Google employees take full advantage of their employer’s largesse, and struggle against the becoming-productive of their playtime by pursuing projects that cannot easily be re-monetized (or perhaps even generate negative value)? Whether through coercion or through persuasion, most Google workers seem to use their 20 Percent Time in ways that are productive – in both the Foucauldian sense (generating new subjectivities) and the corporate lingo sense (increasing output). But this need not be the case. Two possibilities exist. Googlers might resist 20 Percent Time directly by fighting for ‘real’ breaks that are not governed
by the logic of productivity. In other words, they might try to recover ‘authentic’ leisure in a workplace that is disguised as a site of leisure. This strategy would draw upon the traditional demands of the shorter hours movements: A shorter workday and workweek, longer lunches, additional paid holidays, more vacations. This is an appealing project, but another possibility exists.

Rather than oppose 20 Percent Time outright, Google’s demand for innovation might be extended to its natural conclusion. Googlers might take very seriously their employers mandate that they innovative during their time off. I am referring here to Negri’s (2005: 270) understanding of innovation: ‘The workers’ overturning of the totality of the reproductive conditions of capital’. Googlers might engage in sabotage, using innovative time off in ways that are destructive. Here sabotage refers not necessarily to destroying machinery, but to the concept as theorized by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (1916): The conscious withdrawal of efficiency. In order to expose neo-normative control’s latent repressive function, Googlers might pursue projects that cannot easily be re-monetized (or perhaps even generate negative value). Recommended activities include sleeping, drinking on the job, writing poetry, releasing proprietary software to the public under an open-source license, or, the ultimate insult, blogging about creative uses of 20 Percent Time. Googlers might use 20 Percent Time as a staging ground for unrestrained hedonistic excess. Again, the point is not to reclaim some ‘authentic’ desire (versus the fake desire that Google attempts to cultivate), but to collectively carry the logic of innovation to its natural conclusion – in other words, to test the limits of their employers’ ‘benevolent communist’ regime. The point is not that these activities are non-recuperable – surely they are – but in short term, they represent acts of employee sabotage in ways that designing a new email client does not. In other words, the question is not how to reclaim leisure as a ‘pure’ and unfettered space beyond the reach of capital (if this were even possible!) but how to disrupt the cycle of capitalist valorization with the understanding that leisure as such may no longer exist.

Conclusion

Iyer and Davenport (2008: 4) provide a visual model of Google’s 20 Percent Time. The authors explain that Google’s innovative success is a direct result of carefully-cultivated dynamic relationships with employees, consumers, and third-party stakeholders. Their diagram describes ‘Google's Innovation Ecosystem’ – a naturalistic metaphor that evokes both cybernetic models of information flows and ecological cycles. Their diagram has at least an elective affinity with elementary school-style visualizations of the Water Cycle. Consumers, Innovators, Advertisers, and Content Providers all appear within concentric circles, with a mysterious entity dubbed ‘The Google Platform’ in the center. The Google Platform refers not to the corporation per se, but to Google as an ethereal concept. Double-headed arrows indicate feedback loops between the stakeholders and The Google Platform. Crucially, the system is precisely calibrated such that equilibrium is constantly maintained. The model is a creation of the authors, not Google, and the authors give no clear indication that Google executives’ own self-concept aligns with their own. But in a sense, whether or not Google actively understands itself as an ‘ecosystem’ is beside the point. For Iyer and Davenport, the appeal of this model is that innovation appears as a fully enclosed system – all parts
contribute the whole, and there is no connection to the outside. Their diagram exists on a two-dimension plane, and is apparently autopoetic. In a faint echo of Derrida’s sacrificial non-gift, the diagram is a circle, an enclosure, a reciprocal market relation.

But this is not the only possible model. The Google Ecosystem is predicated on the active complicity of all parties. By reneging on their end of the ‘deal’ and refusing to sign off on the implicit social contract, Google employees can break the cycle of reciprocity. This will require reimagining 20 Percent Time not as a market relation, but as a ‘gift’ that need not be returned. Indeed, this is a necessary (if insufficient) condition for freedom.

When critical labour process scholars discuss the postmodern workplace, a tone of haughty disdain often colors their writing, as if to suggest that the class conscious programmer ought not derive any enjoyment from his breakroom foosball table. A symptomatic reading of neo-normative texts reveals a certain anxiety that ‘illusionary’ freedoms might ultimately prove seductive. At times one even detects a trace of nostalgic longing for the despotic workplace where compliance is guaranteed by the abusive foreman, not the sashimi buffet. The prescription is obvious: Peel away the layers of window dressing, and the neo-normative firm reveals its true nature; raw, naked exploitation. For these thinkers, the permissive or benevolent employer is an elaborate scam that must be unmasked in order to build an effective political project. But in their rush to condemn the ‘false’ freedom of the modern workplace, neo-normative theorists ignore the possibility that this freedom – whatever its limitations – might also constitute a zone of vulnerability. Neo-normative workers might be better served by a strategy of oblique resistance than head-on combat: A subject-position of ‘familiar foreignness’.

Recasting 20 Percent Time as a gift will require moving beyond the level of analysis provided by the critical labour process tradition. Etzioni (2009), Žižek (2006), and Cederström and Grassman (2008) all have a common project – to cut beneath the deception and expose the humane workplace as an elaborate lie. They each argue, in somewhat different registers, that humanistic ideals cannot be realized in the context of a private enterprise that is legally obligated to maximize shareholder dividends. Permissive styles of managerial control must be condemned because they mask the underlying truth of exploitation. But Deleuze offers another way of thinking. In his commentary on Nietzsche, Deleuze calls for a Dionysian affirmation of life as against the ascetic negativity of the truth-seekers. He conjures ‘A thought that would affirm life instead of a knowledge that is opposed to life’. Under this logic, ‘[Life and thought] would go in the same direction … smashing restrictions … in a burst of unparalleled creativity’ (Deleuze 2006: 101). It is this creativity that 20 Percent Time renders possible.

As I have argued, the neo-normative corporation grants freedom provisionally as part of an implicit social contract. The unstated expectation is that employees will respond with loyalty, diligence, and above all gratitude, or risk being stripped of their freedom (and employment). Though it presents itself as a gift, neo-normative freedom is recallable, contingent, conditional, and deeply subsumed within a contractual logic. But a closer
examination of the Derridean gift will reveal the impossibility of the gift within a system of neo-normative control.

Recall that for Derrida, contractualism stands in direct contrast to the logic of the gift. To be sure, this not to say that the gift is ignorant of its contractual Other. However, as Derrida (1994: 7) insists, ‘[the gift] must keep a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness’. The pure gift must be recognized by neither the doner nor the donee, lest it revert back to the logic of market exchange. Under the reciprocal terms of a contract, the event of the anti-gift forms into a circular pattern – recognition/gratitude/obligation/counter-gift – thereby annulling the very possibility of the gift itself. As evinced throughout this essay, there can be no question that Google is self-consciously aware of its 20 Percent Time and carefully manages an image that hinges largely on its supposed generosity. But in the pure gift scenario, the donee is already and immediately free from the debt obligation that the contractual anti-gift necessarily entails. Thus, it may be that Google’s ‘love’ for its employees is of the unrequited variety. Corporate paternalism finds its chief adversary in the figure of the spoiled child: Showered with gifts yet ungrateful and infinitely demanding.

At the moment when the cycle of reciprocity is broken, it is clear Google has already mis-recognized its gift by discounting its unpredictable nature. Google may ‘present’ its gift as means of encouraging innovation, increasing productivity, and winning the sympathy of its employees, but the gift knows nothing of the cold, calculating logic of measurement; it cannot be parcelled out in neat 20% segments, for ‘the gift is excessive in advance, is a priori exaggerated’, it is an ‘infinite obligation’ (Derrida, 1994: 38). If there is a cyclical logic at work here, it is only anti-economy of blowback, a set of unintended consequences that cannot be contained. There is a volatile lawlessness and ungovernable nature to the gift that makes a mockery of management’s best laid plans: ‘The gift and the event obey nothing, except perhaps principles of disorder, that is, principles without principles’ (Ibid.: 123). This is a strategy of amplification: the intentional misuse of freedom to generate more freedom – less a ‘strategy of refusal’ than a perverse affirmation.

By granting 20 Percent Time, Google is demanding that its employees innovate – but only within predefined boundaries. Yet Google has given rise to an excess that eludes capture – a creativity that abhors constraints.

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In praise of boredom

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This paper proposes that, because of the reflexive potential in boredom, boredom at work has some utility for resisting managerialist attempts to colonise the emotional, psychological and spiritual life of employees. Starting with the popular assumption in Organization Theory, and among the powerful, that workers can always do more, we follow Marcuse in seeing exhortations to work ever harder, along with excessive attachment to work, as injurious to the human condition. Taking, as illustration, a recent UK government initiative to encourage employers to ‘engage’ their workforce in the expectation of higher profits, we characterise it as an exemplar of such exhortations: insincere with respect to the welfare of workers, asymmetric in allocation of anticipated rewards, an attempt to re-write the employment contract and intending to intensify labour. Inspired by ‘gay science’, we explore the potential of poetry and ‘poetic thinking’ to offer an alternative language with which to talk about work, boredom and boredom at work.

I feel more contented when I remember that I have two professions, and not one. Medicine is my lawful wife and literature my mistress. When I am bored with one I spend the night with the other. Though this is irregular, it is not monotonous, and besides neither really loses anything through my infidelity. (Anton Chekov, Letter to A.S. Suvorin, Sept 11th 1888)

Introduction

Boredom can be defined, loosely, as what we experience when what we are engaged upon fails to engage us. It may seem strange to ‘praise’ boredom, because it is clearly ‘a bad thing’, but, in this paper, we propose that the ‘problem’ of boredom at work can be turned into an opportunity.\(^1\) We suggest that there is some potential utility in boredom for workers, as a way to resist the ever-increasing demands that are made on them. We seek to adopt a radical – in the sense of ‘back to basics’ – approach in our portrayal of the conditions of employed work. Organization Theory (OT) can be dichotomised, admittedly rather crudely, into two broad strands: A critical, generally ameliorative, approach and a functionalist orthodoxy that seeks to serve the interests of management. Critical OT displays an unfortunate tendency towards ever-increasing refinement of analysis that sometimes obscures the basic structural conditions of contemporary

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\(^1\) The inspiration for our title comes from Russell’s *In praise of idleness*. It is a happy coincidence that another source of inspiration for this paper, Brodsky, had already used it in a most appropriate context. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference, ‘Work, Play and Boredom’, May 2010, at St. Andrews University, UK.
employed work, and thus makes it difficult to say anything ‘concrete’. The functionalist orthodoxy, on the other hand, indulges in denial of the disparate interests of capital and class, in favour of a surreal world of ‘rational’ organization, value-neutral management and idealised workers who freely choose to subordinate their own interests to those of ‘the organization’. In trying to avoid some of this sterility, we turn, particularly in our discussion of work and boredom, to a literature outside OT: Poetry and ‘poetic thinking’. For the sake of clarity we also focus on the eternal constants of organized work, rather than on the infinite variations that characterise, and have always characterised, the conditions and experience of workers and managers. Thus we adopt broad stereotypes of both, typifying ‘workers’ as people who, generally speaking, work for money and who engage in a constant struggle to maintain and, hopefully, improve their conditions, and ‘managers’ as those who represent the interests of ‘ownership’ and who, in service of this interest, resist such claims, unless forced to give way by legislation or scarcity. This is a heuristic device adopted in order to simplify complexity, and does not deny the variations inherent in the categories of ‘worker’, ‘manager’ and ‘ownership’, but parenthesises them for the purposes of our argument.

The joys of work?

Certainly from the time of the Industrial Revolution, if not since time immemorial, ‘the worker’ has always been seen to possess a latent capacity to do more work, to work harder. A century and a half of OT has furnished a constant supply of ‘techniques’ designed to unleash this potential, and there is no sign of this supply drying up. It does seem to be assumed, as an eternal verity, that workers will always perform below the level that could be achieved, and, by implication, the level that should be achieved. Of course, it is not only organization theorists that have identified this ‘reservoir of unused energy’. Business leaders, managers, social commentators, politicians, the rich, have also observed this ‘phenomenon’. Indeed, the one group that does not, apparently, recognise this particular understanding of what should constitute a ‘fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay’ is the workers themselves – they may, as individuals, have a view, of course, but it is likely to be different, and, being neither consistent with the dominant view nor expressed in the appropriate managerial language, also de-legitimated. But it is not entirely the case that workers have been alone in resisting the hegemonic certainty that the raison d'être of the worker is to work. It has also, at intervals, been challenged by philosophers and social theorists. For example, in the modern era, Lafargue, in The right to be lazy (1883/2002), saw excessive work as an obstacle to human development, both physical and spiritual, and an impediment to active citizenship. Russell, in In praise of idleness (1935/1976), noted the aversion of the rich to work while they, notwithstanding, prescribed its benefits for those less fortunate than themselves. More recently, for example, Maier, in Hello laziness (2006), has advocated laziness as a way to resist the encroachments of managerialism. From a different perspective, yet augmenting this general view, Foucault’s (1977) concept of the dressage functions of labour strongly suggests that the contemporary organization of paid work is characterised by the increasing intensification of increasingly pointless activity as part of the carceral function of the work organization (see also Carter and Jackson, 2005; Jackson and Carter, 1998, 2007a). Our topic here, boredom, however, is unlike any of these, and is also a profoundly personal experience. And, while laziness and idleness are
fundamentally inactive states, and dressage requires action under compulsion, boredom presages an active state, because it stimulates the desire to act, to change something.

Sharing the concerns of, among others, the above thinkers, we have argued against increasing the commitment of employees to, in favour of increasing detachment from, both work and work organization. However, in advocating this increasing detachment, both physically and spiritually, from employed work, we fly in the face of contemporary management, both in theory and in practice, and, as argued by Deleuze and Guattari (eg. 1984: 104), of the latent but potent desire of people to collude in their own oppression. In this collusion, workers facilitate their greater incorporation into the managerial fantasy of ‘engineering’ the perfect worker and the prospect of achieving the holy grail of a congruency of organizational (sic) and worker goals – and it is worth noting that such congruency would require, not a mutual approach to each other, but that workers should accept unreservedly the corporate vision. In the context of the intensification of labour, an accelerating feature of ‘modern management’ is the continuing urge on the part of managers to acquire the use of what should properly be the prerogative of the individual worker (broadly speaking, his/her psychological, emotional and spiritual life), thus further facilitating enslavement.

The progress the work organization has made towards the total institution makes the spaces for resistance to the pervasive demands of managers correspondingly smaller. But the incarceration of the corporeal worker in physical, or, more recently, cyber, space has limitations in achieving the ‘hearts and minds’ acceptance of the corporate vision that is desired by managers. Workers may ‘attend’ but that does not equate with motivation to work. How necessary, therefore, to engage strategies and techniques with which to corral the emotional presence of the worker! Since the earliest days of the ‘factoryisation’ of work, managers have attempted to make work attractive beyond merely its wage benefit (see, for example, Marglin, 1980). The current vogue for creative play is merely the latest manifestation of this urge. Once something recognisably external and antithetical to the work obligation, play (tellingly, workers used to call a day when the factory was closed through lack of work ‘playing a day’), is, ideally, to become synonymous with work.

A modern fairy tale?

The UK government has been running a campaign, aimed at companies, to encourage them to ‘engage’ their workforce. The full-page advertisement in The Guardian newspaper proclaimed:

An engaged workforce will make a big difference to your business. They’ll each take 5 fewer sick days a year and raise profitability by 12%, as well as productivity by 18%. This same workforce will also generate 43% more revenue. And, if you asked them, they’d tell you that they were 87% less likely to leave. (23.03.2010, emphasis in original)
It is instructive to look at the distribution of benefits from increased engagement. The employer gains significant increases in productivity, revenue and, most importantly, profit. The employee experiences a reduced desire to leave the company, which equates to a reduced cost for the employer, thus contributing to the profit gains. He/she also experiences improved health on five more days per year – or, possibly, just an increased incentive to attend. The claimed gain to the employer is material, while the employee must be satisfied with the less tangible. The claimed benefit to the company is increased profits, while that to the workers is, not surprisingly, only spiritual.

This campaign has been based upon a 157-page report, Engaging for success: enhancing performance through employee involvement (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009), commissioned by the UK government. The authors do not attempt a comprehensive definition of what they mean by engagement, but they do provide a flavour of it, and stress that it is not what they describe as ‘old wine in new bottles’. Although there are ‘overlaps’ with concepts such as commitment, job involvement, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviour, and so on, there are also ‘crucial differences’ (ibid.: 9, para. 15). ‘In particular, engagement is two way: organizations must work to engage the employee, who in turn has a choice about the level of engagement to offer the employer’ (ibid.: 9, para. 16). Importantly, engagement is also measureable, and correlates with both ‘performance’ and ‘innovation’ (ibid.: 10, para. 19ff). Engagement is ‘a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organization’s goals and values, are motivated to contribute to organizational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being’ (ibid.: 9, para. 12). However, in spite of the claims of the authors, there is an overwhelming sense of the all too familiar here.

Coalescing, after World War 2, out of the behaviour modification approach to management, the Organization Development (OD) movement was an approach that sought to engage the ‘total worker’, utilising the theory and techniques of applied behavioural science. The aim of these techniques was to secure involvement, satisfaction, commitment, and so on, with much emphasis on interaction, and often with the intervention of ‘change agents’, in the service of developing a responsive organization in the face of a rapidly changing environment. It was a vogue that reflected the ethos of the 1960s, the period of its greatest popularity. A later definition describes it as

> the attempt to influence the members of an organization to expand their candidness with each other about their views of the organization and their experience in it, and to take greater responsibility for their own actions as organization members. The assumption behind OD is that when people pursue both of these objectives simultaneously, they are likely to discover new ways of working together that they experience as more effective for achieving their own and their shared (organizational) goals. And that when this does not happen, such activity helps them to understand why and to make meaningful choices about what to do in light of this understanding. (Nielsen, 1984: 2-3)

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2 For all that you could wish to know about the ‘meaning’ of ‘engagement’, see Macleod and Clarke (2009).
We would suggest that ‘engagement’ is, at best, no more than a reworking of this general approach, but without the rigorous theoretical basis of the original – a kind of ‘ordinary language’ version of OD, recycled to fit into the very different conditions that pertain half a century later. One of the more surprising aspects of both the campaign and the report on which the campaign rests is the relapse into the sentiments and practices of this OD movement, in an epoch where those at the top of the organizational pile seem to need, and indeed claim to need, unbelievably large cash bonuses to make them engage. Seemingly, those at the bottom still do not. The old adage remains true: To make the rich work harder you pay them more, to make the poor work harder you pay them less.

In the ‘old days’ it felt ‘right’ for managers to beat more effort out of workers and there is some evidence that this is not altogether history (see, for example, Equality and Human Rights Commission [2010] for such evidence in the UK, and, rather more bizarrely, Ehrenreich, 2009: 103, on what she calls ‘motivational spankings’). As workers slowly acquired more protection from employers, the modest bonus scheme became, (if piece-work was not viable), the preferred method to ‘incentivise’ – or, more correctly, ‘incite’ – workers. During this developing understanding of mankind-management, it was still routinely part of the conceptualisation of the relations between employer and employed that there was an inherent conflict of interest between them, each party seeking to optimise their material benefits from the work-effort expended. The advent, in the 1940s and 1950s, typically attributed to Maslow, of the theory that psychological satisfaction could be gained through work spawned the heyday of the motivation-to-work theorists. Conveniently forgetting its clinical origins (see, for example, Maslow, 1943), this theory soon metamorphosed into a theory applicable to an abstracted concept of wage labour. Its use in practice in this form also conveniently omitted the requirement that higher level needs did not kick in until lower level ones were satisfied, a major manifestation of which was an adequate wage. And, as Vroom showed with Expectancy Theory (1964), (a final recognition of the subjectivity of motivation), adequacy of satisfaction of lower level needs is something determined by the worker, not by managers. The widespread perception that, however reasonable a theory Expectancy Theory might be, it is impossible to operationalise in the workplace, is, we have argued elsewhere (Carter and Jackson, 1993), largely attributable to this observation, that motivation to work, as opposed to behaviour, cannot be manipulated by managers, but is a perception of the desirability of the potential rewards offered, on the part of the worker.

Inherent plurality of interest, and the role of perception in motivation, created a problem for encouraging the worker to greater effort. This problem was ‘solved’ with the advent of Human Resource Management by its (unilateral) declaration of the indivisibility of interest amongst those associated with ‘the organization’ – unitarism, then, usurped pluralism as the operant management ‘philosophy’. This allowed the development of the model of the rhetorically re-valorised worker – ‘our employees are our most valuable resource’ – alongside management techniques that engineered an increasingly infantilised employee (see, for example, Sievers, 1994), a condition necessary to dissuade the workers from questioning ‘management’s right to manage’. However, it would appear that reducing the workers’ autonomy has not encouraged their ‘engagement’ with the organization. Hence the need for a government initiative.
The work principle?

It is, perhaps, revealing in itself that this is a government initiative. So dominant has the business model of government become that politicians, elected and unelected, see no contradiction in furthering the interests of business without reference to the impacts on the workers, aka the electorate, or a goodly proportion of it, in whose interest they are supposed to govern. Any attempt by labour to improve its condition is routinely resisted and indeed the prevailing political wisdom, in all parties, is still that workers must work harder and longer. Thus, any call to encourage worker ‘engagement’ assumes that the outcome will be more work. ‘Engagement’ may improve the sense of well-being in the workers (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009) and make them healthier and happier, but it must, firstly, make them more productive. If not, then they must remain unhappy. Managers do not have an absolute desire for their employees to be ‘engaged’. If, by ‘engaging’ them, profits were reduced, then disengaged they would stay. We should not regard expressions of concern for workers as anything other than a desire for more work from them. For that is the purpose of the worker – to work, to perform.

Why do we work? What are its attractions for us? From a psychoanalytical perspective, drawing upon the work of Freud, Marcuse (1969) labelled the current form of the Freudian reality principle ‘the performance principle’. In its earlier form, the reality principle is what gets us out of bed in the morning and off to the, actual or metaphorical, ‘factory’. For Freud, ‘(n)o other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work; ... And yet, as a path to happiness, work is not highly prized by men (sic)’ (1930/1963: 17, note 1). We go to work to earn our daily bread, to bring home the bacon. Because of this manifold existential necessity, we forgo the pleasures we desire – the pleasure principle gives way to the reality principle as the ‘manager’ of our motivation. We forgo immediate satisfaction, pleasure, joy (play), receptiveness, absence of repression, and seek delayed satisfaction, restraint of pleasure, toil (work), productiveness, security (Marcuse, 1969: 30). However, once we have enough to ensure that we can reproduce ourselves, then surely we revert to, at least in part, the pleasure principle? Not so. The reality principle is re-established as the performance principle, ‘which is that of an acquisitive and antagonistic society’, ‘stratified according to the competitive economic performance of its members’ (Marcuse, 1969: 50). Under these conditions, to satisfy the demands of social control, the carceral function of the work organization, and, more subtly, the demands of consumerism, wages must be kept low enough to ensure that workers must work, and this work must occupy ‘practically the entire existence of the mature individual’ (Marcuse, 1969: 45), notwithstanding that the economic affluence of modern society makes this imperative no longer necessary. In contemporary society, the imperative derives, not from primordial scarcity, that which makes the reality principle inescapable, but from a manufactured, organized, scarcity which ensures that workers remain workers. However, the work performed is no longer linked directly to satisfying the existential needs of the worker, but is an abstracted, alienated work, designed to satisfy the desires of the manager. The opportunity cost of performing, for the worker, is much greater than the time and effort expended – work-incarceration also dehumanises. Marcuse suggests (1969: 52) that employment and what we might think of as maintenance activities – sleeping, eating, etc. – leave us only about four hours per day for experiencing the pleasure principle. But even this is contaminated by work, as
the pleasure principle does not function at the convenience of externally imposed time constraints. The more we are ‘captured’ by the logic of work, the less opportunity for resisting the performance principle.

We can now see that ‘engagement’ is merely another aspect of performance, and of the performance principle. And this is not just a rhetorical point. Marcuse comments that the performance principle and its concomitant, surplus repression, produce ‘a destructive dialectic: The perpetual restrictions on Eros ultimately weaken the life instincts and thus strengthen and release the very forces against which they were ‘called up’ – those of destruction [Thanatos] (1969: 50). Perhaps it is even some very dim recognition of this that underlies the increasingly relentless exhortations to positive thinking, to which requirements for ‘engagement’ at work belong: We need pleasure, so, as work comes to occupy more and more of our time, thus allowing fewer and fewer opportunities for the pursuit of pleasure outside work – in any case, an illusory ‘freedom from toil’ because already colonised by the demands of work (see, for example, Marcuse, 1969: 51) – we should find our life-enhancing pleasure within work.

The purpose of encouraging engagement is, in effect, yet another attempt to rewrite the employment contract in favour of the employer. A wage-labour system of employment is eminently simple. One party has a task that they wish to have done by someone other than themselves and can afford to pay for such a service. The other party needs the payment in order to survive. The only detail to be resolved is how much work for how much pay? There is no reason why the employee should share the employer’s views about the necessity, desirability or value of the work to be done. In fact, it is not even necessary for the worker to know the purpose of the work they do. (In contemporary organizations, it is not even necessary for the employer, in the shape of the owner, to know what their employees do, or why they do it, or even who they are.) However, it is not really surprising that there are benefits to both parties from having a commitment and involvement beyond the minimum contractual one. The unresolved question is, how are these benefits to be shared? As noted, the preferred distribution is material benefits to capital and spiritual ones to labour. As people work for money – whatever the claims of some managers who have been exposed to motivation-to-work theory – extra work for no extra pay is a form of the rate-cutting so prevalent in piece-work systems, and from which workers have traditionally had to protect themselves. However, whereas workers are immediately sensitive to relative reductions in wages, they are less secure when the reduction is achieved through ‘engaging’ their interest and commitment. There is, of course, no law preventing employers sharing the material benefits of increased engagement, but this does not seem to have much attraction for them. Even if there is held to be some balance between the gains of material and spiritual benefit, there is no balance of effort – it is not a win-win situation. The employers’ gains cost them nothing, the workers’ gains mean more work for them. It is, then, not putting it too strongly to say that it is dangerous for the worker to be seduced by the promise of increased satisfactions for which there is no contractual benefit, whereas it is something-for-nothing for the employer. And once the worker becomes ‘engaged’, their ability to resist exploitation diminishes. (For a cautionary, Weberian, analysis of some of these issues, see also Andersen and Born, 2007.)
The dismal science versus the gay science

Much of OT, explicitly or implicitly, is concerned with improving organizational efficiency. While it is not difficult to agree that the purpose of organization is to improve on ‘nature’ by reducing entropy and utilising the benefits of cooperation – organization creates an artificial order and allows groups to do what individuals cannot do by themselves – it is much more difficult to justify the arising implied claim that the 

*raison d’être* of organizing is an absolute efficiency. In the realm of physics there may be an absolute measurable efficiency, but that is not the case in human systems. To be sure, some claim a cardinal organization science where all is quantifiable and where efficiency is precise and knowable, but even within a generally positivist OT this is seen as an extreme fundamentalist position. Mainstream OT is usually content with more ordinal measures. There, improved efficiency is claimed by asserting that the presence of one thing is better than its absence, or *vice versa*. However, either case suffers from a sad delusion: Efficiency, as all can agree, is the relationship between inputs and outputs, but what cannot be specified in organization involving people is what, objectively (or scientifically), *constitutes* inputs and outputs. Reckonable inputs and outputs, we would argue, are determined, ultimately, not by science, but by power (see, for example, Jackson and Carter, 2007b: Chapter 10). It is inescapably the case, then, that any OT that makes claims to improve organizational efficiency is pursuing a normative goal, is not value-free science and is serving some particular interest. By that logic, other goals are possible, such as optimising human happiness, and/or organising for an ecologically viable planet, or, more sinisterly, for the subjugation of certain groups. The prioritisation of improving efficiency as the purpose of OT locates it as properly part of the science of the efficient allocation of resources: Economics, also known as ‘The Dismal Science’.

This phrase, now widely used (even by economists [see, eg. Marglin, 2008]), to describe economics, is commonly taken to have originated in a rather strange – not to mention appalling, and not just to modern sensibilities – essay by Thomas Carlyle (1849), *Occasional discourse on the negro question*. In this essay, Carlyle was lamenting the reduction of government to the laissez-faire application of supply and demand. He insisted that governance needs to be contained within a moral framework, which he saw as having been denied by what we would now call economics (in effect, the metamorphosis of political economy into economics?). The point that he seeks to make is that it ought not to be possible to have an economic system that is, or that is claimed to be, independent of an ethical position (for example, that claims to be scientific in the most rigorous sense of ‘science’). It is possible to agree with this point, irrespective of whether one agrees with the particular value position that Carlyle

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3 Carlyle’s essay is extremely controversial, as it is, on the face of it, an unsavoury, racist, pro-slavery diatribe. However, Carlyle obscures his own opinions by constructing the text as a report of a speech by an unidentified speaker, by a writer whose landlady discovered and published it, in lieu of unpaid rent when the writer absconded! This has led some to see the essay as satirical comment on the unrelieved condition of the unemancipated English working poor. However, a later re-working of the essay as the *Occasional discourse on the negro question* (1853) tends to negate this interpretation. Carlyle’s preferred value system, which he sees as truth rather than opinion, is a singularly unpleasant Christianity, but this should not, in itself, detract from the utility in his view of laissez-faire economics as the Dismal Science.
proposes – this caveat, of course, stresses the point that all value positions represent a selection from a plurality of possibilities, multiplicities, not objective truths. Carlyle’s insistence that society is not, and should not be regarded as, synonymous with ‘the market’ still resonates. However, Carlyle saw work as a moral imperative for man (sic), as a good in itself, especially for those lower down in the Great Chain of Being – the workers, slaves or not.

John Stuart Mill, responding to Carlyle’s essay with *The negro question*, sees work as not a good in itself. There is nothing laudable in work for work’s sake... The worth of work does not surely consist in its leading to other work, and so on to work upon work without end. (Mill, 1850: 4)

And yet it is precisely this idea that informs much of contemporary OT – a dismal science, indeed. We live in a curious world where our well-being requires an endless economic growth fuelled, in part, by increasing effort from workers. This is facilitated by a compliant OT, various forms of official propaganda and an educational system ever more geared to producing employees. However, it appears that all this economic activity – work-fuelled consumption – is driving our planet to the brink of runaway global warming. Part of the problem of even beginning to address such issues, and, in particular, the role of organization and of work in both problem and solution, is that the very language of this OT is imbued with its commitment to ‘improving organizational efficiency’, integral to which is a belief in the necessity for ever increasing production and productivity, for work and more work. This language, thereby, severely constrains what it is possible to say about work. To speak to such problems, therefore, we need a ‘new’ language. Where, then, might we look for inspiration, to find an alternative vocabulary with which to talk about work in the contemporary context of organization?

There is, of course, a paradigm of critique encompassing, *inter alia*, philosophy, political theory and a sector of OT. Yet a distinguishing feature of this paradigm is its intellectual distance from that of which it speaks: The worker experience – we have, for example, the autonomist ‘refusal of work’, Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘body without organs’ (1984 passim), the idea of ‘authenticity’, both in its rigorous existentialist, and in its new-ageist, usage. Though useful in its context, this language is not yet enough.

Carlyle opposes his Dismal Science to Gay Science, but this is a term now more commonly associated with the work of Nietzsche. The idea of a Gay Science originated in medieval Provence and can be seen as, in modern parlance (but without capturing anything of its significance), a holistic approach to poetry and life. The full title of the most relevant book by Nietzsche is ‘*The gay science, with a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs*’, (1887/1974) and it is indeed a book replete with aphorisms, poems and songs. Nietzsche described it as ‘a bit of merry-making’ (1974: 32) and ‘awesomely aweless’ (1974: 33), yet it is firmly based on his argument that science, the ‘serious, disciplined, rigorous quest for knowledge’, does not have to be ‘stodgy, heavy, dusty’ (Kaufmann, 1974: 5), but can ‘sing and sizzle’ (Kaufmann, 1974: 13). An alternative translation of ‘gay science’ is ‘joyous science’, and it is a concept that has profoundly influenced later thinkers, notably the poststructuralists (see, for example, Deleuze and Guattari [1986]). However, the original phrase, ‘*gai saber*’ is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* simply as ‘the art of poetry’. It is the Gay Science with which we wish to align ourselves here.
Banville (2011: 20) notes that, for Kafka, ‘the artist ... is the one who has nothing to say. By which he means that art, true art, carries no message, has no opinion, does not attempt to coerce or persuade, but simply – simply! – bears witness’. This suggests that the ‘language’ of art, and, for our purposes here, particularly the language of poetry, may be a very appropriate one to counter the economistic language of OT. The possible connections between poetry and organizational analysis are well-recognised. In a special issue of the journal Management Decision (2006) – part of an ongoing project which focuses on the potential relation between poetry and management – Saunders offers an extensive discussion on the nature of poetry and role of poets. She talks about poetry’s ‘capacity to carry epistemic as well as (self-)expressive value, to liberate as well as to describe the full panoply of practice’ (Saunders, 2006: 506) and the poet’s ‘freedom from fashion’s oppression and from particular cults and allegiances’ (Saunders, 2006: 507). Her argument is that ‘because our language is polluted and impotent, a poet’s task is also to cleanse the language’ and, particularly relevant to our own argument later, that poetry has ‘an unnerving capacity to open up an empty, vibrating space at the centre of things’ (Saunders, 2006: 507). In an amusing illustration of the poet’s need to write, The poet’s call, Nietzsche (1974: 355) likens poetry’s evocations to ‘deadly little arrows’, at least as far as poetry that rhymes! Not something we find in OT, other than perhaps as a sense of dread. In short, we want to propose that poets and poetry can give us the possibility of a different language in which to speak of the labour process, one that has not already been colonised by OT, a language that does not necessarily speak of ‘work upon work without end’, a language that might make it possible to begin to discuss Mill’s argument (1850: 4) that ‘(t)o reduce very greatly the quantity of work required to carry on existence is as needful as to distribute it more equally’, not least because his view that progress in science, justice and good sense would bring this about is yet to be realised.

Larkin(g) about

According to the poet and Nobel Laureate, Joseph Brodsky, poetry is ‘the soul’s search for its release in language’ (1991: xii) or, as Seamus Heaney, perhaps more prosaically, puts it, ‘poetry ... kick[s] in like an emergency power system to reinforce the self, besieged as it is by [the] constant clamour and distraction of circumstance’, adding that poetry helps ‘...the individual to credit the validity of personal experience and intuition’ (Heaney, 2004: 14). Thus, when we are besieged by the ‘constant clamour and distraction’ of work, an everyday experience, poetry legitimates our sense of being human rather than just a worker, authenticates our experience and affirms our understanding of being. And it does so in a language which we can make our own, rather than one that makes of us victims, and objects, as the language of OT, and, especially, managers, talking about, inter alia, work does, because, there, we are talked about in a language that we do not share (see Lyotard, 1988). Primo Levi likened work – ‘le boulot’, the daily grind – to a ‘boundless region...less known than the Antarctic’ (1988: 80). This ought to be shocking, given the vast amount of study on the subject represented by OT, but is not when one considers that, mainstream or critical, it is still, overwhelmingly, one group writing about another in a language they do not share (see also Levi, 1988: 80), even if some of it is sympathetic.
When one reads of worker experience of work, of which there is a rich store, we find a language very different to that of OT. And, unsurprisingly, poets, too, have a lot to say about work, also in a very different language to that of OT. Thus, in the autobiographical novels of the poet Charles Bukowski, *Post office* (1971/1984) and *Factotum* (1975/1982), we see in his depiction of his experience of work nothing at all that resonates with either Functionalist OT or its critique. It is, however, the poet and University Librarian, Philip Larkin, who has furnished us with one of the most accessible and memorable images of *le boulot* in his poem *Toads* (Larkin, 2003: 62 emphasis in original):

Why should I let the toad work
Squat on my life? …
Six days of the week it soils
With its sickening poison …

He answers his own question in another, unfinished, poem (Larkin, 1988: 69):

At thirty one when some are rich
And others dead,
I, being neither, have a job instead …

Larkin was part of The Movement, a literary group with a commitment to writing about the experienced world in a language that was accessible. He is uncompromising in affirming that, for those of us who are not of independent means (or dead), there is little alternative to work, though work may be neither pleasant nor desired. This, perhaps somewhat nihilistic, view may seem surprising in an artist, a group popularly thought to be ready to suffer for their art at the economically barren margins. But Larkin the realist, in *Toads revisited* (2003: 90), finds no attraction in the unwaged life, which he sees as the domain of the sick and the lame, the no-hopers (it should be borne in mind that this poem dates from 1962, a time when full, even overfull, employment was the norm):

No, give me my in-tray,
My loaf-haired secretary …

The tension between not wanting to work for a living, yet wanting the benefits of having a job – the income, security and social aspects that, realistically, can only come through selling his labour – is a recurring theme in Larkin’s poetry (see, for example, *The life with a hole in it* (2003: 187) and *Aubade* (2003: 190)). *Toads* again:

Ah, were I courageous enough
To shout Stuff your pension!
But I know, all too well, that’s the stuff
That dreams are made on …

And, again, in *Toads revisited*:

Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road.

One could hardly wish for a more succinct and evocative expression of the dilemmas that work poses for most people! Larkin acknowledges that, for him, as for most of us,
working, though not a life, is for life (see also Motion, 1982). Indeed, according to Bradford (2005), Larkin dreaded retirement (incidentally, a state which he never managed to achieve). In Larkin’s poetry, contra OT, there is no room for the romanticism of ‘self-actualisation’, of ‘shared goals’, of ‘engagement’. For Larkin, work, as life in general, comprises a catalogue of equally pointless routines (see, for example, vers de société (2003: 147-8)). As he expresses it in Dockery and Son (2003: 108-9), ‘Life is first boredom, then fear’.4

In a festschrift published the year after Larkin’s death, Maitre revisits Larkin’s Toads in a poem entitled Dodging the toad (1986: 18-19):

No, give me your arm, old toad;  
I’d break it if I could!

This is a sentiment that expresses rather more resistance to the demands of work, though one that Larkin would probably have appreciated. There is an extensive academic literature on resistance in organizations. Fleming and Spicer (2007: 29) point out that resistance is a normal reaction to the exercise of power, in whatever form. They also point out that resistance is not an external facticity, but a heuristic construct used by the researcher in the analysis of observed behaviour – it is an empirical-analytic construct. Since our concern here is non-empirical and synthetic, even prescriptive, we do not intend to explore this literature further. However, the concept itself is useful to our argument. Resistance does not have to seek to change the world; it can be no more than small acts that provide a source of transient satisfaction, small private denials of power, of the encroachments of the desires of others. Resistance does not even have to be a conscious reaction to be effective – yet it is still resistance. When the encroachments are the attempt to colonise the interior life of the worker for the service of the organization, to impose definitions of self-hood (for example, as worker, rather than individual), resisting this, protecting one’s own sense of self, perhaps even re-defining that in opposition to the demands of work, can be experienced as a pressing necessity. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1825, in Gardner, 1972) poignantly puts it:

Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve,  
And Hope without an object cannot live.

‘Engagement’ can be seen as part of an increasingly general trend to encourage the worker to depend on the work organization, not just for economic well-being, but also for emotional, psychological and spiritual well-being. If this level of incorporation is to be challenged, what will serve as an antidote? One possibility, we would suggest, is to resort to boredom.

4 Larkin is often viewed as a misogynistic reactionary, even rather unpleasant, but this is a rather simplistic, over-attenuated, view, and, on the 25th anniversary of his death, his reputation is undergoing considerable rehabilitation. He was well-regarded as a University Librarian, a noted jazz critic, a talented photographer and managed to conduct at least three affairs of the heart at the same time (see, for example, Bradford, 2005).
First boredom, then...?

Boredom has long been a topic of interest to thinkers. To the ancients, as a manifestation of *acedia* – ‘the noon-day sin’ – and dangerous to the soul, it was linked to sloth and apathy – indeed, it was considered to be ‘the worst sin, since all other sins derived from it’ (Svendsen, 2005: 17). Later it was seen as a particular affliction of the wealthy. Some see it as the defining quality of the modern age. Noting that boredom has been of little interest to, for example, psychology and psychiatry, and that it has become the ‘preserve’ of philosophy and literature, Svendsen provides a long, but nonetheless, as he notes, incomplete, list of prominent writers from these areas who have written about boredom, precisely to make the point that all of them belong to ‘the modern age’ (2005: 20). It is also worth noting here that, in English, this particular sense of the words ‘bore’ and ‘boredom’ have very uncertain etymology and, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, did not appear with this sense before the eighteenth century, and the first appearance of the word ‘boredom’ is credited, even later than that, to Charles Dickens, in his novel *Bleak House* (1852). This seems to reinforce the idea that boredom is a characteristically modern state of mind. It is possible to suggest that the concept, and the quality, of ‘being bored’ emerged in parallel with the onset of industrialisation: In the pre-industrial period workers worked in accordance with the seasons and the demands, and constraints, of nature, oscillating between, for example, manufacturing and agriculture, or fishing, and working considerably fewer hours on average than they did after industrialisation, and, indeed, than we do now (see, for example, Thompson, 1968). With industrialisation, and its concomitant ‘factoryisation’, workers also lost any control over the process of work. Weber notes of this period that

(a) man (sic) does not ‘by nature’ wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose. Wherever modern capitalism has begun its work of increasing the productivity of human labour by increasing its intensity, it has encountered the immensely stubborn resistance of this leading trait of pre-capitalistic labour. (1930/1976: 60)

In losing this struggle and, at the same time, losing a previous identity as producers, becoming objectified as workers, ‘boredom’ became a meaningful concept.

For Svendsen, boredom is about lack of personal meaning, though also ‘not just a state of mind; it is also a characteristic of the world’ (2005: 15). He proposes that ‘(b)oredom can be understood as a discomfort which communicates that the need for meaning is not being satisfied’ (2005: 30), and that this sense arises because we are given such meaning – (or rather, it is imposed on us) – whereas, on the contrary, it is something that we need to construct for ourselves. He particularly links boredom to the passing of time, since, in his view, ‘(b)oredom normally arises when we cannot do what we want to do, or have to do something we do not want to do’ (2005: 19). However, it is also clear that boredom is, or can be, a stimulus to action, invention, creativity – it has what Russell (1930/2006: 35) called ‘motive powers’. This observation is common to many discussions of boredom. Russell further argues that ‘a certain power of enduring boredom is ... essential to a happy life ...’ (1930/2006: 39).

In any case, there is, among thinkers, a wide degree of consensus that boredom is a normal part of the human condition, that it focuses thought on the problem of existence,
and that it stimulates the desire to escape, not least from boredom itself. Boredom is widely seen as a stimulus to reflection. For example, for Heidegger, boredom, ‘drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog’ (1929/1998: 87), forces us to confront both the emptiness, and the possibilities, of existence. Boredom, the ‘being-left-empty’ and the ‘being-held-in-suspense’, is profoundly constitutive of Dasein, a defining characteristic of ‘humanitas’. As Agamben puts it, ‘Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened from its own captivation to its own captivation’ (2004: 70, emphasis in original). In a different literary sphere, Tolstoy (1995: 462) evocatively describes boredom as ‘the desire for desires’.

Boredom is a very personal experience. For example, seeking the very epitome of boredom, Heidegger describes having to spend a few hours on a ‘tasteless station of some lonely minor railway’, waiting for a train (1995: 93). However, the poet John Betjeman (1962), in similar circumstances, experiences the very opposite emotion. While Heidegger speaks of his lack of interest in the surroundings, an inability to read or think, counting the trees, studying the notices and doodling in the sand, Betjeman can think of no more pleasant place to be, experiencing the railway poster (incidentally, advertising the delights of Bavaria) as ‘delicious’ and finding delight in the station’s lilac tree. Boredom is, clearly, peculiar to the individual. Even so, it may, like enthusiasm, be ‘infectious’. But, in the context of employed work, employers can use and gain from enthusiasm; boredom, on the other hand, defeats them. It is personal and protected. ‘The organization’ cannot make use of it. It is because of this that boredom can form a base for resistance to the demands of management. It gives the worker the opportunity to ‘buy out’ of the corporate vision. Disengagement from the corporate fantasy world creates space in which to regain an identity that is not derived from the wishes of management, rather than existing as an idealised corporate labour-unit. Boredom stimulates awareness of the life outside the organization.

We are not, of course, advocating boredom as a way of life, but merely as a useful antidote to exploitation at work. Indeed, as is already well-known, boredom is a salient feature of modern work, but it is almost universally regarded within the organizational literature as in need of remedial treatment in order to optimise the productive potential of the worker – boredom can be cured. This kind of approach is common in discussions of boredom, ranging from the academic journal to the broadsheet press. Thus Fisher, for example, makes the point that boredom at work can afflict any occupation or profession, but sees it as a problem with ‘serious consequences’ (1993: 395) and concludes that ‘the right responses to boredom might be functional to both the individual and the organization’ (1993: 414, our emphasis). More recently, Mann, for example, talks about the need for ‘boredom busters’, because boredom at work ‘has been associated with a range of negative outcomes including poor performance’ (2007: 92). Hollis (2007), emphasising evidence that high-flyers do not like feeling bored and tend to move on, cites strategies for dealing with boredom on offer from management consultants. It is not surprising that consultancies may see advantages to offering ‘solutions’ to the ‘problem’ of boredom in the workplace – there is money to be made out of ‘curing’ boredom, and it seems to be a booming market.

However, the poet Joseph Brodsky (1995) has a more constructive approach. Giving the Commencement Address at Dartmouth College in 1989 (a liberal arts institution that,
interestingly, includes one of the most prestigious business schools), Brodsky took the
opportunity to warn his audience, to prepare them for the eventuality that ‘(a)
substantial part of what lies ahead of you is going to be claimed by boredom’ (Brodsky,
1995: 104). Boredom, Brodsky proposes, is to be embraced as a natural human
experience, if only as the precursor to something better. Boredom provides a space for
contemplating things of desire, things to strive for. Nonetheless, these things, if
achieved, will only give a transient satisfaction, because, he argues, boredom cannot
be cured. So, to experience boredom is not to be suffering from some pathological
condition, psychological or moral. According to Brodsky,

(when hit by boredom, let yourself be crushed by it; submerge, hit bottom. In general, with things
unpleasant, the rule is, the sooner you hit bottom, the faster you surface. The idea here ... is to
exact full look at the worst. The reason boredom deserves such scrutiny is that it represents pure,
undiluted time in all its repetitive, redundant, monotonous splendor. ... (B)oredom is your window
on the properties of time that one tends to ignore to the likely peril of one’s mental equilibrium.
(Brodsky 1995: 108–9, emphasis added)

He adds, ‘It puts your existence into its proper perspective…’ (ibid.: 109).

Some things at work just are boring, perhaps inherently, or perhaps as a reflection of
our own emotional condition, transient or otherwise. Either way, boredom is something
for us to experience, not something to be proscribed, treated or legislated against by
managers. In the way that enthusiasm cannot be demanded of us, other than at the level
of the signifier, so our boredom cannot be banished by fiat – or by some behaviour
modification technique furnished by OT. After all, if our job is boring, whose fault is
that? Not that of the workers. Job design is the prerogative of management. If managers
have so little regard for our capabilities that, as Morgan (1997: 312) noted, many people
exercise more skill in driving to work, than they do at work, why shouldn’t we be
bored? Has not deskilling been an essential part of the expansion of management
control over workers for decades? Reversing the trend would loosen the grip of
managers on the productive process – not a prospect for which they have ever shown
any enthusiasm. This is what makes calls for ‘engagement’ nothing more than the
prescription of a placebo – workers might feel better, but the underlying conditions have
not been remedied. Indeed, one might suggest that to start to believe that what is boring
is actually engaging could indicate a much more worrying development!

Brodsky makes the point that ‘...what’s good about boredom, about anguish and the
sense of meaninglessness of your own, of everything else’s existence, is that it is not a

It might have been wondered why the UK government’s initiative, deriving from the
work of MacLeod and Clarke (2009) the government commissioned, is aimed at
employers rather than at employees, if they too have so much to gain from
‘engagement’. We would suggest that, perhaps, the answer is that, for the worker,
‘engagement’ is just another exploitative technique that is very unlikely to deliver even
spiritual gains to them – it will be, precisely, yet another deception. As is implied by
Brodsky’s essay, whether, in our daily existence, we are bored or enthusiastic, engaged
or otherwise, has significance beyond the mere experience of such emotions, because
they are part of the window onto understanding our very existence. In the contemporary
world of work it is still all too often assumed by the powerful that it is part of their prerogatives to define what constitutes meaningfulness for, in this case, members of work organizations. But meaningfulness cannot be defined by an other. To embrace boredom at work may be a step towards resisting such attempts to impose repressive, inauthentic, deceptive definitions of who we are. The more we identify with work in ‘their’ terms, the more entrapped in the Performance Principle we become.

Conclusion

We started this paper with a quotation from Chekov, which also has the value of pointing out that boredom at, or with, work is no respecter of profession. But most people do not have the luxury of Chekov’s two ‘loves’. For them, the commonly proposed ‘cure’ for boredom at work is, in effect, more work, but this surely cannot represent an escape. Nietzsche, writing about ‘work and boredom’ (1974: 108-9) and ‘leisure and idleness’ (1974: 258-60), waxes lyrical in his critique of the conditions of employed work (and he was writing in 1887, but what he describes is just as recognisable in contemporary conditions). He notes that, for most people, ‘work is a means and not an end in itself’ (ibid.: 108), and that end is the wage. But ‘chasing after gain compels people to expend their spirit to the point of exhaustion’, and the emphasis on work and more work, the urge towards doing ‘anything rather than nothing’ is driving out joy – joy becomes suspect, ‘ashamed of itself’, culture is ‘throttled’: ‘more and more, work enlists all good conscience on its side’ (ibid.: 259, emphasis in original). But some people, such as ‘artists and contemplative men (sic), ‘would rather perish than work without any pleasure in their work’, and these people ‘do not fear boredom as much as work without pleasure’: Boredom should not be warded off at all costs, it is ‘that disagreeable “windless calm” of the soul that precedes a happy voyage and cheerful winds’ (ibid.: 108, emphasis in original). Boredom is a necessary prelude to thinking, to creativity, to what might be called a civilised life.

Given the limited opportunities for workers to opt out of the managerial ‘regime of truth’, we propose the therapeutic benefits of boredom at work. We champion Russell’s argument, that work should be seen as just ‘a necessary means to a livelihood’ and that, for workers, ‘it is from their leisure hours that they [should] derive whatever happiness they may enjoy’ (1976: 21). Rather than trying to make work appealing to the senses and to last as long as can be borne, it should bore workers to the extent that they demand as little as possible of it. How much better to do four hours per day of tedious but useful toil, than to do eight hours of pleasurable but significantly useless work? Of course, as noted above, much work contains much that is already boring – what is required is to reject the managerial verity that boredom is both remediable and a dysfunctional response on the part of the worker (in a ‘properly managed’ organization), which thus places the responsibility for feeling bored onto the worker and characterises it as a shameful lack of commitment to corporate values. Boredom, when functioning correctly, really should generate the desire to escape from work to something more pleasurable, rather than the obligation to re-educate one’s priorities. Benjamin (2002: 105) suggests that ‘(w)e are bored when we don’t know what we are waiting for’. Contra Benjamin, we define boredom at work as knowing precisely what we are waiting for: Finishing-time!
references


Norman Jackson:

Lack of fortune, need to labour,
Life of Engineer I quest,
Solving problems, building structures,
Looking for solution best.
Then one day the revelation
comes from high, from God is sent.
‘Engineering is not holy,
What I bless is management’.
Study further –Myers and Maslow
Theory X and Theory Y.
‘Man works not for bread alone’
That is what the ‘experts’ cry.
Management? ‘A good career move’
Frontier pushing, where it’s at.
Earning plenty, ruling ’millions’
And, at thirty, getting fat.
What’s the problem?, feeling weary,
Nothing works that I can see.
Management’s a load of bollocks.
Better do a PhD!
Now at last unfit to labour
in a good and worthy job.
Better take the only option.
Go and join the uni-mob.
Undergraduates; MBAs;
RAEs, and ‘long vacation’
Then I learn the awful truth
What’s holy is administration.
Early retirement? Snatch their hand off,
Forget about the doubt that lingers.
Managers, the lot, you keep ’em
What a chance to wave two fingers.
Now at Leicester, come to harbour,
Heat of sun no more to fear.
Visiting Fellow. Lovely people,
Treat me well and buy me beer.

Pippa Carter:

Lost for words.
A like trajectory,
without the engineering bit.

Visiting Fellow, Leicester.

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Who is Yum-Yum? A cartoon state in the making

Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen

The departure of this article is a Danish public campaign called ‘Healthy through play’. The campaign is organized around a cartoon figure named Yum-Yum. Yum-Yum is the campaign’s description of itself, but it also becomes a semantic of the State. With Yum-Yum, the state is turned into a cartoon character with long plushy ears, widely spaced eyes, and a very large and soft nose. Maybe we are witness to the making of a cartoon State, a playful State? Yum-Yum is cute, friendly, playful, inviting, and above all completely harmless. The cartoon state seems to be a state that gets in the way of itself. It is a state whose impotence consists precisely in the fact that it is state. The state would rather be (civil) society. In order to work as state and have power over the self-relation of it citizens, it has to look different than a state. The state plays that it is (not) a state and hopes that someone will play along so that it may yet work as state.

Abstract

The departure of this article is a Danish public campaign called ‘Healthy through play’. The campaign is organized around a cartoon figure named Yum-Yum. Yum-Yum is the campaign’s description of itself, but it also becomes a semantic of the State. With Yum-Yum, the state is turned into a cartoon character with long plushy ears, widely spaced eyes, and a very large and soft nose. Maybe we are witness to the making of a cartoon State, a playful State? Yum-Yum is cute, friendly, playful, inviting, and above all completely harmless. The cartoon state seems to be a state that gets in the way of itself. It is a state whose impotence consists precisely in the fact that it is state. The state would rather be (civil) society. In order to work as state and have power over the self-relation of it citizens, it has to look different than a state. The state plays that it is (not) a state and hopes that someone will play along so that it may yet work as state.

Introduction

The present article presents an analysis of the campaign ‘Healthy through play’, organized by the Danish Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries. ‘Healthy through play’ is aimed particularly at vulnerable families and their willingness, knowledge, and capacity to live a healthy lifestyle with respect to both food and exercise. In general terms, the campaign exists as one among a larger number of campaigns that have been launched over the course of the past decade, directed at citizens and their administration of their own lives. This applies not only to the health sector but also the labor market, transportation, education, and so on. The starting point for this article is the fact that this is a campaign ultimately concerned with the self-creation of citizens. Central to the article, in turn, is the way in which the campaign links its content to play. Why is the concept of play so central to the campaign? What do play and campaign share in common? What do health and play share in common?

Play is understood in this article as a particular form of communication, which makes social contingency visible by doubling the world into a virtual play world, and a real one that can be played with (Andersen, 2009; Baecker, 1999).

Basically, this is a state-run campaign that simultaneously seeks to and seeks not to be a campaign, seeks to and seeks not to be regulation (Pors, 2009). This results in a form of embarrassment, and the way to escape this embarrassment is through play. I argue,
therefore, that play is not simply articulated as a substantial health-related element (although it is that, too), and that play is also not simply articulated as a pedagogical medium, a so-called ‘edutainment’ (although it is that, too). Play becomes the very form of the campaign, permeating the campaign to the extent that every element of the campaign oscillates between play and seriousness. The campaign is portrayed in such a way that we never really know if something is meant in a serious way or whether we are simply playing a game. This becomes constitutive for the campaign as such, leaving open the question of whether the campaign itself is play or campaign.

In the article, I challenge the notion of media neutrality. And I try to overcome the fascination often seen in media studies whenever a new medium is discovered, in this case the medium of play. I realize that this has already been done. A range of ideology-critical works within media studies have long since deconstructed the distinction between form and content by showing that the form is a significant contributor to the definition of the content; that is, that the content can be lost in the form. My point is different but parallel. My point is that experiments with new media such as play or contracts in public campaigns directed at citizens not only affect the possible content of the campaign but also gambles the very form of the state, including the relationship between administration and citizen. This relationship is gambled because the independent forms of the chosen media in the ‘Healthy through play’ campaign are apparently stronger than the campaign’s adaptation of them. The relation between campaign and medium becomes reversible so that the campaign does not simply form the concept of play as medium. The concept of play transposes the relationship and becomes a form that plays with the campaign. It turns out that the concept of play as form is so forceful that it refuses to be a mere medium for a state-run campaign. The definition of form is reversed, and the result seems to be a state describing itself through the language of play as playmate for at-risk families, who in turn are portrayed as hungry for cheap amusement and voluntary entertainment. This is so pronounced that the state has even been replaced in the campaign with a cute childish cartoon character called Yum-Yum. The character Yum-Yum emerges as political self-description. It is the apparent articulation of what we might for now refer to as the cartoon state.

Previous research

The changes in the relationship between play and organized power have not gone unnoticed in the literature internationally. Some people see play as a positive figure of resistance. Jerzy Kociatkiewicz, for example, has studied so-called role play, where participants, directed by a game master, create a story together and make the game move along. Kociatkiewicz’s point is that during the game, a creative, poetic, and non-linear form of self-organization takes place, which modern organizations can learn from, particularly in relation to the question of creativity (Kociatkiewicz, 2000). This perspective is also taken by Daniel Hjorth, who sees a close link between entrepreneurship and organizational spaces for play and creation (Hjorth, 2004: 43; 2005), and by Charalampos Mainemelis and Sarah Ronson for whom play represents the cradle of creativity. They see the role of play as a way ‘to help organizations maintain more flexible and more sophisticated forms of consistency by encouraging their members to occasionally experiment with possible realities, behaviors, or identities’ (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006: 117). Still others link art and play in
questions of productive play with identity and innovation (Meisiek and Hatch, 2008; de Monthoux and Statler, 2008).

Peter Fleming takes a more sceptical view in his critique of fun programs in modern organizations (Fleming, 2005), as do Bogdan Costea et al. (2005) in their conceptual-historical studies of the relationship between play and work. The authors state:

> It seems that, after a hundred years of apparently very rational ‘Apollonian’ approaches to efficiency and productivity, management itself has entered into a kind of ‘Dionysian’ mode, a spirit of playful transgression and destruction of boundaries, a new bond between economic grammars of production and consumption, and cultural grammars of the modern self. This, we argue, is what might lie behind the increased use of ludic technologies in management. (Costea et al., 2005: 141; Costea et al., 2006)

What this literature has in common, however, is that ‘management’ is assumed to refer to management in private companies. They leave out reflections of how play is incorporated into the state and public administration as a steering tool and overlook, therefore, the fact that new ludic technologies affect not only the concept of work but also the very form of the state and the relationship between state and citizen. It is in this realm that the present article seeks to make its contribution.

**A brief introduction to the campaign**

The campaign in question is from 2008 and is the result of collaboration between the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries and the National Board of Health. The campaign is designed to motivate Danish families with young children aged 1-6 to live a healthier lifestyle. The campaign motto is ‘to make it easy, fun, and manageable to live a healthy lifestyle’ (Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries, 2008a).

The campaign ‘Health through play’ is not the only current health campaign that relates to play. ‘Health through play’ makes reference to ‘The kid box’, which is a health-promoting campaign designed for pre-schools. Through the kid box, institutions can access boxes of games that incorporate health-promoting issues. ‘The kid box’ was created by a partnership between the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries, Danish Meat Association, FDB, the food industry, and Suhr’s seminary (The kid box, 2009). Additionally, together with the Association School and Society, the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries and the National Board of Health have designed and promoted the game ‘Playing for health – dialogue and collaboration about the health of the class’. The game was introduced in 2007 and its stated purpose is to promote dialogue among school, parents, and students in the school and formulate and make agreements about food and meals, movement, drugs and alcohol, knowledge and attitudes (National Board of Health 2007, Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries 2008a-c, Andersen 2009). In addition, The National Board of Health organized a campaign in 2005 aimed at young men using cell phone tests. The young men were rewarded with a ‘hot babe’ on the telephone if they did well on the test. As the company behind the campaign writes: ‘The test contains informal and humoristic elements – it is supposed to be fun to participate. That is why everyone’s index is translated into a ‘babe’ who is more or less inviting depending on the individual score’ (Wellware, 2006).
Denmark is not the only place where play is used as a tool in health campaigns. England and the USA have similar campaigns. In the USA, there is even a website for the discussion of different serious health games, ‘Public health games – Serious games and Simulations for Public Health and related Fields’ (PublicHealthGames.com). Other sites combine film, information, and games for children, e.g. the side ‘Kidshealth’ (KidsHealth.org). Another site is ‘Health Finder’ which is located on the US Department of Health and Human Services website (Healthfinder.gov).

These campaigns bear witness to a discursive shift towards health promotion that has taken place in the health care system over the past twenty years (Højlund and Larsen, 2001; Joyce, 2001; Roy, 2008; Michailakis and Schirmer, 2010). In a Danish context, The Public Health Program marks this shift: ‘The Public Health Program is meant to ensure political responsibility for an effective prioritization and coordination of preventive efforts across sectors, administrative levels and competencies’ (Sundhedsministeriet 1999: 6; Højlund and Larsen, 2001).

The public health program identifies the Danish people as one body, which needs to be healthy, and, paradoxically, the construction of this imaginary collective body produces a new form of individualization according to which the individual is expected to create and administer her or himself in relation to the health system. The campaign organizers, The National Council for Public Health, define it this way:

> Central to health promotion is the notion that the individual needs to be good at mastering his or her life, and, as public authorities, we need to help create the best possible framework. The ability to master one’s life is not always a private matter. (National Council for Public Health, 2002: 11)

As a whole, the campaign ‘Health through play’ can be characterized as a third-order campaign. The campaign does not address its final target group directly, which are socially at-risk families, although it is available to this group, since its media includes a publicly accessible website where children can play online games and where parents can find recipes and play an online game. The campaign primarily addresses public institutions and health professionals who come into contact with at-risk families, and the campaign’s message is that these professionals need to campaign to ‘their’ families. Thus, it is a campaign for campaigns, which is why it includes possibilities and different tools that can be used in the campaigns that address the families directly. As the website says: “Health through play” is a health-pedagogical tool for the health professional (health visitor, consultation nurse, health consultant, dietician, etc.) working with families and the improvement of food and movement habits’ (Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries, 2008b). The professions that the campaign addresses do not answer directly to the campaign. In terms of employment, those who perform services within the campaign’s sphere of interest may belong to a wide range of different organizations both regionally and in municipalities. The campaign aims to link functions, roles, and employees in a shared health promotion effort across formal divisions. And the common aim is defined as running a specific campaign in relation to families. The campaign basically places itself in a situation, therefore, where its diverse target group is responsible for judging whether it is relevant or imposing. However, the campaign contains another segment. The goal is not only to make the targeted families change their behavior. The goal is to convince the families to run internal health campaigns in relation to themselves! In this sense the campaign share a lot of
The families are asked to define goals and make internal agreements about food and exercise, and these agreements should be modeled after the campaign. The idea is for the families to continually enter into self-agreements, one after another, where each agreement has a narrow focus and is limited to a specific time period and then a new theme becomes the focus. What we have, then, is a state-run campaign for professional campaigns for family-driven self-campaigns.

The campaign introduces itself on its website www.legdigsund.dk. The campaign is made up of a number of elements, including:

1. A comprehensive design based around the cartoon character Yum-Yum.
2. The family’s agreement page designed for families to make internal agreements about food and movement.
3. ‘Cooking with Yum-Yum’: a cookbook with healthy family meals.
4. The Yum-Yum plate: A contest in which the prize is a special divided plate, which ensures a healthy distribution of meat, greenery, and condiments.
5. ‘Get moving with Yum-Yum’: A catalogue for families with healthy games for inside and outside.
7. ‘This is what others have done’: Interviews in writing and on audio file with four families about their efforts to live a healthier lifestyle. Translated into several languages.
8. ‘Everyday dilemmas’: An online game for parents in which they are confronted with everyday dilemmas about food and shopping.
9. Yum-Yum’s kitchen: A page with several online games for children about what is healthy and less healthy, e.g. memory and fruit game.

**Play in the campaign**

I will begin my analysis by looking at the way in which the campaign observes play and health; the way that play is articulated as a theme relevant to the campaign and is integrated into the different elements of the campaign. The campaign designates play as an aspect of health. It is considered healthy to play, both because play often incorporates movement and physical activity, which is healthy, and because play creates social relations and friendships, which are also considered healthy. This is not something I am going to discuss. Instead, I am going to focus on the way in which the campaign is linked semantically to play, that is, the way in which play becomes articulated as a necessary medium for the dissemination of information about health promotion to at-risk families. I am going to do this in three steps. First, I will describe the way in which ‘fun’ has already been reflected in an earlier report about at-risk groups. Then, I will take a look at particular elements of the campaign, which the campaign describes as edutainment. And finally, I will look at the way in which certain elements of the campaign, which were not initially defined as play, still end up being
subjected to the logic of play. The materials I discuss are the public reports that precede the campaign as well as the campaign website and its various elements.

Semantics is defined, as the stock of generalized forms of differences (e.g. concepts, ideas, images, and symbols), which can be used in the selection of meaning within the communication systems. In other words, semantics are condensed and repeatable forms of meaning and expectations available to communication. These generalized forms are relatively dependent upon the specific situation and obtain their specific content from the communication that selects them (Luhmann, 1993: 9-72; Koselleck, 2004; Andersen, 2011). Initially, therefore, the semantic analysis is a relatively simple analysis of asymmetrical distinctions between concept and counterconcept and the way they shape expectations – in this case expectations about the connections between play, campaigns, citizen, and health professionals.

The health of socially at-risk citizens 2007

On the website for the campaign, ‘Healthy through play’, is a link to a report that precedes the campaign. The report is entitled ‘The health of socially at-risk citizens – barriers, motivation, and possibilities.’ It was initiated by the National Board of Health and carried out by SFI (The Danish National Center for Social Research). The report is an interview study of a number of citizens from different at-risk groups and a number of employees, who are in frequent contact with the target groups. The point of departure for the report is a previous report, which stressed the importance of including target groups in planning and implementation processes. The interviews with the citizens are about their perception of health and their experience of the public sector and its activities aimed at citizens. The interviews with the employees are primarily about their experience of citizens’ experience with the activities of the public sector, including the employees’ own activities in relation to citizens. Basically, therefore, the report is an attempt to identify with the way citizens experience the world and in particular the public sector. It represents an attempt to construct public sensitivity to the citizens’ construction of their environment.

Opposition

One of the consistent themes in the report is the opposition the system is met with by citizens. The report says:

Many (employees) are aware of the barrier present in socially at-risk citizens as a general skepticism and antipathy towards anything that they associate with the public system. To avoid that health-promoting initiatives are met with reluctance by citizens, employees are proposing these principles for their effort: 1) Employees need to show that they are ‘like the citizens’, meaning that they need to be open about their own difficulties with living a healthy lifestyle. 2) Employees need to act as role models but in a way so that they are not perceived as perfect and as unattainable ideals. 3) Employees must proceed slowly and should not pressure the citizens. (National Board of Health, 2007: 28)

This is a remarkable way to perceive opposition since it avoids the obvious equivalence between opposition and opponent. From the perspective of the National Board of Health, ‘opponents’ almost functions as counterconcept to ‘opposition’. A citizen who
opposes the system is precisely not conceived as an opponent of the system. According to the National Board of Health, employees should not meet opposition as upfront and counter opposition with opposition. Instead, they must avoid and evade the opposition that they know is present. This produces a strange non-position for the citizen since his or her opposition is recognized but without the recognition of her or him as an opponent. The employee knows that the citizen feels pressured and understands therefore the opposition and resistance. On the other hand, the citizen is not recognized as an actual opponent with everything that goes along with it in terms of subject status: independent will, motives, interests, etc. This is because the National Board of Health wishes not to oppose the citizen but to stand next to him. This is achieved by simulating citizen. As the quote states, the employees must show that they are like the citizen. The quote does not say that employees are also citizens, but that they are like them. The quote also does not say that the employees are not perfect. Rather, they should not appear perfect. Here is another quote:

Moreover, employees in one of the re-training centers report using humor and self-irony during physical activities with citizens. By making fun of their own lacking fitness, employees can help create an informal atmosphere that leaves room for everybody. (National Board of Health, 2007: 40)

Again, we are told that the employee is to simulate the citizen. The concomitant difference is ‘strong system’ versus ‘weak citizen’. The quotes do not suggest that the system needs to show weakness. The system and its employees have to play that they are weak like the citizens.

**The systems must not look like a system**

What is at stake is the fact that the public system does not want to look like a system. Therefore, those who are being regulated have to be able to voluntarily respond to regulation and public activities and they have to have the appearance of an offer. Preferably, they should take the form of a gift; they have to be able to be offered in a way so that the receiver can turn them down and they have to be able to be given without the expectation of repayment:

However, most employees prefer for the different health-promoting activities to be available services, not compulsory activities. They believe that more can be accomplished with their respective user groups by encouraging them to participate and by illustrating the benefits of the free services. Imposing health projects on people should be avoided, because it might increase the opposition to – rather than interest in – health. (National Board of Health, 2007: 31)

So, the ambition is to make users accept the offered activities knowing that it is exactly this ambition that may lead to the users’ rejection of the offer. The services have to be voluntary, not because the system loves voluntariness but because it is the best form of regulation. The basic self-observation is that the system’s form of regulation does not work if it looks like regulation. Only regulation that is not visible as regulation can be expected to work as regulation without detrimental opposition from citizens (see also Pors, 2009: 42-47). To regulate, regulation has to suspend itself.
Health promotion must not look like health promotion

These things also affect the system’s communication of enthusiasm about health promotion. The report says:

It is important to take ‘baby steps’ when working with health in relation to at-risk groups (...) Taking baby steps means that citizens should not be pressured into living a healthier lifestyle. According to the employees, it is important to proceed slowly otherwise the citizens will back out (...) Many show a certain ‘resistance to the system’, which means that they will presumably also be skeptical about health-promoting initiatives. In relation to these groups, employees believe that it is important not to focus too heavily on health. It has to be integrated as part of everyday life by making a healthier choice easily accessible, e.g. with fruit bowls on the lunch table etc. (National Board of Health, 2007: 30)

Health promotion, thus, should not focus too heavily on health. Focus on health does not promote health! Health promotion needs to be integrated into everyday life. Everyday life is not health promotion. Integrating an element into a whole means that the element in question no longer appears as itself but as a part of something else. Arguing in favor of integrating health promotion into everyday life is the same as arguing that health-promoting efforts have to be made invisible as an independent effort. Health promotion needs to vanish into everyday living. It is okay to see the fruit bowl but not the effort it is a sign of. This introduces another distinction, which I will pursue later, that is, a distinction between health promotion as weighty seriousness and the fruit bowl as light and accessible. Health promotion seeks to be what it is not: Light and accessible.

It has to be fun

These observations lead the report to a focus on fun and enjoyment. The report says:

According to citizens whom we have talked with, in order for different health-promoting offers to be successful, it is important that people do not feel pressured into participating but can decide on a voluntary basis whether or not they want to participate. Moreover, it is important to incorporate fun and enjoyment into health-promoting projects so it does not become a unwanted responsibility or yet another requirement that they cannot honor. (National Board of Health, 2007: 8)

Health promotion should not be an unwanted responsibility for citizens and it should also not be difficult. Health promotion should equal enjoyment and fun. These words are repeated in the following quotes, which extends the chain of equivalence: ‘collective fun’ = ‘snowball fight’ = ‘wiffle ball’ = ‘cooking’ = ‘laughter’ = ‘humor’ = ‘street performance’:

Finally, several employees point out that fun and enjoyment ought to be an important element of health-promoting efforts. By stressing that it should be fun to exercise and live a healthy lifestyle they hope to be able to break down some of the barriers that citizens and employees might experience. Some employees provide examples of activities that have caused collective enjoyment such as snow ball fights, wiffle ball, and cooking. (National Board of Health, 2007: 31)

That is why it is important to reflect on physical activities rather broadly. This might take the form of exercises during breaks at re-training facilities and other activities that brings out laughter. Generally, it makes sense to consider how to improve people’s health through humor and enjoyment. One interviewed person tells about how her retraining process included participating in a street performance workshop. They concluded the workshop with an hour-long performance for
their children to the great amusement of the children, themselves, and the employees. (National Board of Health, 2007: 40)

The quote emphasizes the importance of thinking health-promoting activities ‘rather broadly’, that is, not ‘narrowly’. Again, health promotion is not supposed to look like health promotion. ‘Narrowly’ is what we all recognize as health promotion. ‘Rather broadly’, in turn, is everything that can be considered health promoting but which does not immediately appear as such.

Health promotion is supposed to be fun, playful, and voluntary and above all should not look like health promoting work characterized by seriousness, responsibility, and duty.

**This is what others have done**

This figure of ease is also expressed in the communication of certain families’ health efforts on the website ‘legdigsund.dk’. Under the heading ‘This is what others have done’, four families from different parts of the country relate their experiences of changing their everyday habits. The families all express that the responsibility for their health is in fact easy to take on but also that they do sometimes eat less healthy food. One family talks about the ease like this: ‘It is no more difficult to cook low-fat food; it is merely a question of taking it into consideration and cutting down on fat content wherever you can’. Another family tells: ‘I often sit down with the kids and peel our afternoon fruit while talking with them – and then the fruit goes down much easier’. A third family:

I used to often think about whether she [the daughter] actually liked broccoli, cauliflower, leaks, or other more ‘exotic’ vegetables, but now I just cook the food – and she eats it. Our food is now arranged so it looks a little more appealing, and this has made it easier for me to get her to eat whatever is served. The recipes have been easy and hands-on.

**Edutainment**

Play and ease is the name of the game. This is reflected in ‘healthy through play’, which makes extensive use of games and play. The campaign refers to it as ‘edutainment’, which combines ‘education’ and ‘entertainment’. I am going to explore in the cases I study here how these ‘edutainments’ describe themselves as play but do not necessarily make play possible. It is a question of a health pedagogy that plays that its activities are play.

**Spin-the-bottle**

This game is distributed to a number of pre-schools. In the material the game is described as ‘an edutainment game (play and learning) that incorporates knowledge about food and movement through play’ (Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries, 2008b). The game consists of a large poster (see below) on top of which you spin a bottle. The game thus makes reference to the classic game ‘spin-the-bottle’, but instead of having the bottle point to a child it points to a field on the poster. The children take turn spinning the bottle, and the child whose turn it is has to either perform a physical activity or answer a question depending on whether the bottle point to a green or a white
field. Some of the activities are: ‘walk like a penguin’ or ‘hop like a bunny’. Some of the questions are: ‘where do fish live?’; ‘where does meat come from?’; or ‘which drink contains no sugar? A: soda, B: water, C: juice.’

The activities clearly incorporate play, e.g. when walking like a penguin. This means to play something you are not – a penguin – and they incorporate excitement since
walking like a penguin makes you realize that there are many different ways in which to walk. The questions, however, do not incorporate play. They have an unambiguous pedagogical aim, where the answer can be either better or worse (although it seems somewhat superfluous; the answers to the questions are printed upside down at the bottom of the poster. They are to ensure that the facts of the game are perceived as such and not as play). This makes for a rather odd game where a green field indicates play and a white field indicates instruction. The game is designed in a way so that it oscillates between play and pedagogy depending on where the bottle lands. So the spinning of the bottle is a game about whether we are playing a game or not.

**Everyday dilemmas**

‘Everyday dilemmas’ is described as a game about ‘the choices you make when you shop’. It is an online game aimed at the family’s housewife. The reason I stress housewife instead of simply the person who does the shopping in the family is that the main character in the game is consistently portrayed as a woman faced with a range of dilemmas when shopping for food. Basically, the game introduces the player to a number of shopping dilemmas, and for each dilemma you are given three possible answers. Once you have solved one dilemma, you can move on to the next one until you have been through all of them.

One dilemma goes like this:

> Your shopping list says: Onions, carrots, red peppers, and mushrooms. It will take a long time to cut up all these vegetables. I could instead buy frozen vegetables even though I am not able to buy all of them in one bag. What would you do? Click on a picture.

The possible answers are: 1. Fresh vegetables; 2. Frozen vegetables; 3. Fresh and frozen. Another dilemma is: ‘Hanne has written fish down on the shopping list and is considering what kind of fish to buy’. Possible answers: 1. Fresh fish and minced fish meat; 2. Frozen; 3. Canned fish. Finally, a third dilemma: ‘It is important that children try many different kinds of food. Some children need to taste food many times before they will eat it’. Possible answers: 1. Something familiar; 2. ‘Hidden’ vegetables; 3. Vary what they like. None of the situations represent an actual dilemma. They are simply choices among alternatives. The only reason for calling them dilemmas must be as a way to make it look like a game.

You are given a set of optional answers and once you have clicked on one, you are presented with the game’s rating of your choice from a health perspective. If you answered ‘canned fish’ in response to the second dilemma, you are told that ‘canned fish is as healthy as fresh fish but pay attention to how much fish and how many other ingredients are in it’. If you answered ‘something familiar’ to the third dilemma, the response is: ‘Children who try many different foods while they are young will be more open to new tastes as they grow older. Sometimes children have to try new food many times before they get used to it’.

Once you have clicked your choice, you are directed to a page where you not only receive the response to you selection but also see a new drawing of a housewife and her thoughts. If you clicked ‘Canned fish’ you see a housewife thinking to herself: ‘tuna –
with some pasta, cottage cheese, and a bag of frozen peas, that takes care of dinner’. If you clicked ‘something familiar’ you see her thinking: ‘Emil does not really like fish, but fish cakes make it easier’. A consistent theme is that food should be easy. Everything has to be easy. The game suggests that it does not expect its target group to want to work hard. We might say that the game works hard to make anything appear easy. There is a different logic here; that is, if advice is easy to follow (in the end, this is not actually a game but counseling for someone who is thought to be unwilling to receive counseling), then there is no excuse not to follow it. That means that it includes a certain kind of responsibility. The game takes responsibility for giving the citizen the possibility of taking on a health responsibility by making the health responsibility so easy to bear that there is no way around it. The question is if the effect does not become the unbearable lightness of the health responsibility. But lightness does not exclude guilt, quite the reverse: The harder it is to come up with personal excuses for not doing the right thing, the greater the sense of guilt when you fail to live up to your responsibility.

In conclusion, although ‘Everyday dilemmas’ presents itself as a game, it really is not. Rather, it is a pedagogical pamphlet filled with patronizing advice and dressed up as a game: Patronizing because it so clearly communicates its low expectations of the citizens.

### Serious forms become play

The campaign also incorporates forms that are not initially play-like but which it seeks to make playful. It includes, for example, a cookbook called ‘Cooking with Yum-Yum’, which, like any cookbook, contains recipes and also weekly plans and shopping lists. But the cookbook wants to also be fun, easy, and playful. In a note to health consultants it says:

> The cookbook is designed as a tool that you can use in your dialogue with the families – particularly to encourage them to prepare easy dishes. The book is filled with images of food that you can use as a point of departure in your conversations. The book also contains ideas for how to make children participate in the preparation of food (...) which it can be fun and instructive for the whole family to get together around. (Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries, 2008b)

The recipes use a particular logic of naming. The all have double names. First are the funny names such as ‘Dragon-cakes with green swords and rescue boats’; ‘Fiery spears with dragon teeth in white sea fog’; ‘Red princess soup with veil’; and ‘Knight pasta sprinkled with flames’. Second are names which more signify the content of the recipe. The first name appeals to fantasy. It brings excitement to the food and its preparation, reaching in to a world of adventure. An example of this double naming logic is: ‘Knight-cakes with golden eggs and fiery sprinkles’, which without the fantasy reference is called ‘Fish-cakes with potatoes, carrot salad, and remoulade sauce’. Admittedly, golden eggs sound more interesting than potatoes. The citizens are offered a doubling of the world where in the rational health promoting food preparation is united with play and adventure.
Anything that is perceived as boring is translated into something that sounds fun and attractive. Cooking and eating should be like playing. This cookbook even encourages playing with your food. The fundamental perspective throughout the cookbook is that its users are basically uninterested in food and cannot be motivated to cooking on the terms of cooking, which is why cooking has to be made to look like something else. Here is a recipe example:

**Knight-cakes with golden eggs and fiery sprinkles**  
Fish-cakes with potatoes, carrot salad, and remoulade sauce

**This is what you need:**
- 800 gr of cream of fish
- 4 large leeks – finely cut up
- 2 tablespoons of rape-seed oil
- 600 gr of potatoes
- 3-4 large carrots – grated
- ¾ dl of remoulade
- 2 dl of soured whole milk (1,5%)

**This is how you do:**
- Wash and peel the potatoes and boil them for 20 min.
- Wash, peel and grate the carrots
- Mix the cream of fish with the finely cut leeks
- Fry the fish cakes in oil on a hot pan
- Mix remoulade with soured whole milk
- Serve the fried fish cakes with boiled potatoes, grated carrots and remoulade sauce

**Safe half of the fish cakes for the next day**

*Figure 2: Fish-cake recipe.*

**Fun and sporty agreements**

More interesting, however, are the so-called agreement pages. There are eight agreement pages, one for each type of nutritional advice in the campaign. The basic idea
of the agreements is that parents and children in individual families should make agreements with one another about food and movement. The role of the health professionals is to sell the idea and supervise the agreement conversation. The agreements cannot be about just anything. The eight agreement pages each contain their theme, which needs to be discussed. These have been taken from the eight nutritional advice points in the campaign. Another element is that the agreements have a limited duration so that the family makes an agreement about a new piece of advice when the first agreement expires, etc.

The campaign addresses itself to health professionals: ‘As a health professional, the agreement pages allow you, through dialogue with the family, to find out which nutritional advice would be particularly pertinent for the family to focus on’. The family then writes down the agreement as a concrete goal, e.g. ‘take a thirty minute walk twice a week’ (Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries, 2008b). This form of agreement is interesting. It is not only a question of health professionals interfering in the individual family’s eating habits. It is a question of intervening in the family members’ mutual social relations by providing a special form within which sociality can exist – the form of contract – without opening up a dialogue about the fact that the contract is also a particularly value-laden form. It affects the social space. Having shared norms in a family, e.g. about not putting sugar on the breakfast table, means something entirely different than making an agreement about the very same thing. Agreements indicate that someone is seeking to contractualize internal family relations (see also Andersen, 2003; 2007; 2008). This contributes to creating the family as a negotiating family. But why does the campaign do this? It is done in order to make unambiguous regulatory ambitions look like voluntariness. It is meant to look as if it is the family’s own initiative to take on particular health prescriptions. The campaign does not like coercion and wagging fingers. It has to appear as if the family has formulated the contract on their own, that it has emerged from below, and denotes a horizontal relation of mutuality among the family members.

Figure 3 shows two examples of agreements, where one focuses on sugar and the other on fruit and vegetables. On the right-hand side of the page is the campaign’s nutritional advice combined with other nutritional information. The right-hand side is where the health professional begins his or her ‘dialogue’ with the family by introducing a piece of advice and providing information about health. It is basically one-sided communication about what is healthy and unhealthy. A clear line marks the distinction between the right and left-hand side of the page. The right-hand side represents one-sided communication, framing the creation of reciprocity, which is later supposed to be found on the left-hand side of the page. It is on the left-hand side that the agreement is to be written, in the field at the bottom of the page entitled ‘Our agreement’. At the top middle of the page it says ‘tear here’. The idea is that once the agreement has been made, the family tears of the right-hand side of the page whereas the left-hand side can be posted on the refrigerator. Why not post the entire page? It is precisely because the agreement has to appear as if it has emerged from within the family itself. The unambiguously defined framework for the agreement, which appears on the right-hand side of the page, has fulfilled its function and can be disposed of, in part so that we may forget the one-sided regulatory origins of the agreement.
Below the agreement is a monthly plan. When a family member contributes something towards the objectives in the agreement, it can be written here. As the material says: ‘The children can post a sticker on the agreement table on the page every time they do something that benefits the agreement’ (Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries, 2008b). We could say that what you write or post on the agreement table constitutes the actual signature of the agreement (Derrida, 1988: 124-26). It is when the family shows that it observes the agreement that it attains its afterlife and becomes an actual agreement (Derrida, 2007: 213). At the same time, the ongoing filling in of the table allows the family to monitor itself and keep track of their food and movement habits. Does the family become better at eating six servings of greeneries a day because it is part of the agreement?

![Figure 3: Examples of agreements.](image)

But the agreements are not only formally odd. The campaign also expresses a certain embarrassment in relation to the form of the agreements. The agreement pages have been designed to not look like actual agreements, and colours and drawings create a fun, childish, and inviting appearance. Despite the fact that these agreements are about the
promotion of health in at-risk families, whose health is often threatened by poor
nutrition and lack of physical exercise, this seriousness is lacking from the agreement
pages. What is important is ‘promoting’, not health risks. They support the positive
energy and motivation, not the obligation inherent in any contract. Addressing the
family, the material says:

Make agreements with your child. Your child sees you and uses your habits as a mirror – also in
relation to food and movement (…) It is a good idea to create little rituals in your daily routines,
e.g. to tick off the agreement table every day after you pick up the children. Many children take
agreements very seriously, which makes it fun and a game to keep the agreements. (Ministry of
Food, Agriculture, and Fisheries, 2008c)

Here, the embarrassment associated with contracts is transformed into the notion that
contracts are in fact fun. They are a game. And keeping a promise is like playing a
game. This creates a strange form of double communication according to which the
contract is on one hand a contract with mutual responsibilities and on the other hand a
contractual game, where it is fun to fill out the table. There is, in fact, a difference
between breaking a promise made as part of an agreement and loosing a game by not
scoring a certain number of vegetables for the week.

**Campaigns and the tension between form and medium**

Traditional media theorists perceive campaigns as planned communication efforts that
strategically choose the medium or media expected to fit the target group most
effectively. Since Shannon and Weaver (1963), media have been perceived as
communication channels and media theory often imply media as technical media for the
transportation of messages and information. These media include newspapers, radio,
and television. In recent years, the concept of what can be perceived as a media has
exploded, not least because of the Internet. But also computer games are seen as a new
media, and the incorporation of computer games as an independent media has led to the
discovery of play and games as communication media, and many communication
programs offer instruction in the design of computer games for the prevention of stress
and other issues. However, while the concept of medium has exploded and become
more nuanced in recent years, the distinction between communication effort and
medium has been maintained, a distinction asymmetrical in nature since focus is on the
media while the effort is constituted by the interest with which they are being observed.

If we observe ‘Healthy through Play’ from a media-theoretical perspective, we
immediately see that it employs a range of different media such as the Internet,
pamphlets, and cookbooks. And if we extend the concept of medium slightly, we are
able to also include agreements and regulation as media employed by the campaign.

I am going to replace the distinction between communication effort and medium with
the distinction between form and medium and reserve the original distinction for the
description of campaign communication. The distinction between form and medium
was originally suggested by Heider in 1925 (Heider, 1925/1959). And Niklas Luhmann
has subsequently integrated it into his theory about social systems.
What distinguishes this distinction is that it defines forms and media as without essence. It is not a particular essence that decides whether or not something can be said to have the quality of medium. Form and medium are defined in relation to each other and only in relation to each other. This means that something becomes a medium if it is defined as such by a form, and a form, in turn, is only a form to the extent that it makes itself manifest through a medium. The advantage of this kind of empty distinction is that the question of what is form and medium becomes empirical. The question is: ‘*How* elements of a medium are linked to forms and not whether a form represents something external to the medium’ (Stäheli, 1997: 116). Thus, what is perceived as form and medium respectively depends on the observer.

A *medium* consists of loosely coupled elements, and *form*, on the contrary, consists of fixed coupling of elements. Media are characterized by a high degree of dissolution and are receptive to Gestalt fixations (Luhmann, 1987: 101). In a medium, elements are independent of one another. When a form shapes a medium, the otherwise independent elements are condensed into a context in which they become more or less dependent on one another: ‘Forms (…) arise through the concentration of relations of dependence between elements, i.e. through selections from the possibilities offered by a medium’ (Luhmann, 1987: 102). Moreover, media always consist of many elements while forms reduce down to an entity that it can order: ‘No medium gives only a single form, for then it would be absorbed as medium and disappear’ (Luhmann, 1987: 103).

The relationship between form and medium is itself a form. And as Stäheli notes:

> Each element of a medium is itself a form, i.e. the tight coupling of another medium's elements. Thus form and medium are self-referentially entangled: the elements of a medium are forms of another medium. There is neither a last medium, notwithstanding the supermedium of meaning, nor a last form. (Stäheli, 1997: 111)

Forms only emerge if a medium makes itself available, but the form, in turn, asserts itself vis-à-vis the medium, which cannot do anything to resist the rigidity of the form. However, the difference between form and medium is relative in the sense that the coupling of elements in the forms can be more or less tight, which leaves room for a greater or smaller level of elasticity. Heider provides the following example in which writing is the form and the alphabet the medium: In writing, for instance, a multitude of forms is produced by different combinations of relatively few elements, the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. The letters can be combined because they are independent of each other. (Heider, 1959: 7)

He provides another example where the shaping does not happen in space but in time:

> The telegraphic code represents an extreme case. Its manifold of signs is produced by different combinations of just two elements. It’s a script which employs only two letters. Again, the elements, that is, the dots and dashes, have to be independent of each other. (…) If a combination in time is used, the temporal position of one element has to be independent of the temporal positions of the other elements. (Heider, 1959: 7-8)

Luhmann points out that there are, however, restrictions on the shaping of media, and these restrictions emerge precisely because the elements of a medium are themselves forms. Thus, restrictions develop when the formation processes mutually disturb one
another (Luhmann, 1987: 102). Speech happens when air molecules are put into formed vibrations. That is only possible if the molecules themselves do not vibrate. But in the case of strong wind or even hurricane the medium is destroyed because it assumes forms, which deform the formation of speech. Stäheli goes on to discuss this problem in his dissertation and points out that Luhmann presupposes that ‘Elements of the same medium are equivalent which grants them a certain Selbigkeit (sameness)’ (Stäheli, 1997: 112). He considers the implications of a non-pure equivalency between a medium’s elements. Without unfortunately exploring the idea in depth, he arrives at the idea of the deformation of form (Stäheli, 1997: 113). This is an idea I will draw on below.

What I believe to be able to observe is that the ‘Healthy through Play’ campaign treats certain asymmetrical forms as ranking equally and that these forms provide resistance in such a way that it creates reversibility in the relationship between form and medium so that the medium comes to shape the form and the campaign form becomes the medium.

If we choose to see the campaign as a communication form, everything that the campaign tries to make manifest through its form turns into media, that is, Internet, play, regulation, posters, contracts, etc. Play, agreements, posters, etc. are independent media which are condensed into mutual inter-dependency within the form of the campaign. Internet, play, regulation, posters, contracts are media because they can be formed by entirely different campaigns with entirely different messages.

What functions as medium for one form can, from a different point of observation, be seen as independent forms that relate to other media. There are always restrictions for the way a medium is formed and these restrictions have to do with the forms of the independent elements.

Perceived as a particular form of communication, campaigns can be observed, I suggest, as a form that both differentiate and unite ‘communications efforts’ and ‘media’. Campaign is the unity of a specific difference, which can be formalized in this way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communications effort</th>
<th>Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Campaign

Figur 4: The form of campaign.

Thus, campaigns constitute a form of communication whose every communicative operation divides the world into the formulation of specific communicative efforts on one hand and media perceived as potential means of dissemination for the effort on the other hand – and this is all there is in the campaign optics. Each time a communication
effort is formulated, it is precisely only an effort in relation to a possible medium, and from the perspective of the campaign, media, in turn, are only media for an effort.

Thus, from the perspective of the campaign, play, agreements, Internet, health, cookbooks, etc. are either a message or a medium. The campaign perspective is blind to the fact that, for example agreements could be a form of itself and not just a medium.

But what are considered media by the campaign are perceived, from other points of observation, as forms with their own media. And in relation to the ‘Healthy through Play’ campaign, I am going to focus on play as an independent form of communication in order to then discuss the relationship between campaign and play in ‘Healthy through Play’.

The form of play

In his book *Homo Ludens* from 1936, Johan Huizinga describes play as an independent cultural form, which cannot be reduced to other forms. The first part of the book explores the possibility of seeing play as an aspect of other forms. ‘The more we try to mark off the form we call “play” from other forms apparently related to it, the more the absolute independence of the play-concept stands out’ (Huizinga, 1971: 6). Play, says Huizinga, is characterized as being fundamentally superfluous (Huizinga, 1971: 8). By this he means precisely that the meaning of play derives from play itself. It is not a function of another form. It is not a task.

While Huizinga observes play as cultural form, Bateson observes play as a distinctive form of communication, which always involves meta-communication about whether or not play is taking place. Bateson explores the specific difference that is being drawn when play communicates the fact that ‘this is play’. He suggests that play is the unity of the difference between ‘These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote’ (Bateson, 2000: 180) and ‘these actions in which we now engage, denote what these actions denote’. When children play-fight, for example, they draw a continual distinction between play-fighting and actual fighting by letting the feigned strike signify the strike of actual fighting but not signify that which an actual strike would signify in a real fist fight. The form of play can be formalized in this way:

![Figure 5: The form of play.](image-url)
The outside of the distinction represents that with which you can play but which play cannot be. The outside is, perceived from within play, the reality in which the representational figures of language apply and in which signs and actions mean what they say. Someone who puts out fires is a fireman and does not merely play that he is. Play toys with the outside of representational figures but has to remain on the inside where representation, sign, and actions, always assume a ‘as if’ quality. It is play with signs, representations, and actions through signs, representations, and actions, which point in the game to the meaning of these in ‘real life’ without possessing that meaning in the game.

Play doubles the world into the world of play and a ‘real’ world, and the doubling takes place on the side of the play. Dirk Baecker formulates it in this way:

In play, socialness is constituted by ways of reflection onto itself as the other side of itself. In play, socialness is experienced as what it is, namely as contingent, roughly meaning that it is neither necessary nor impossible, or again, given yet changeable. Play in general reveals the form of the social by which the play infects the world. (Baecker 1999: 103)

Thus, play represents a communicative socialness characterized by its doubling of this socialness so that the contingency of the social reality becomes visible in play. This doubling of the world in a fantasy world and a real world on the fantasy side of the distinction applies to the playing subject as well. As playing subject, you must be prepared to play along, and playing along also means doubling yourself into the playing self and the self outside of the game. As a player, you have to be prepared not only to observe the contingency of the world but to see yourself as contingent. The ‘playing self’ puts ‘the real self’ in parenthesis and that makes it possible to freely act out different roles in play without being held responsible at the end of the game. You are able to play with your self and thus see the contingency of the manifestation of the self.

The relationship between form and medium in the ‘Healthy through Play’ campaign

I have shown the way in which the ‘Healthy through Play’ campaign observes play as a medium for its communications effort. The question remains whether and how play lets itself be formed within the specific forms established by the campaign, particularly the agreement pages discussed earlier. Since my material is campaign material rather than specific interactions between health professionals and at-risk families, the foci of my analysis are the conditions for possible relations between form and medium.

Here, the first thing that strikes me is the campaign’s third-order character; a state-run campaign designed for health professionals to campaign to at-risk families, who are meant to campaign to themselves. This means that the ‘Healthy through Play’ campaign can only link its elements to the extent that they maintain a certain level of plasticity in relation to further formation in the first and second order. Because of its third-order status, the state-run campaign can only shape its material to the extent that the formation process can be continued in varied form, first by the health professionals in relation to the families and subsequently by the families in relation to themselves. For example, agreements in ‘Healthy through play’ are clearly created as a medium, which
is supposed to carry the campaign message about health-promotion into the families. However, what qualifies the agreements as medium from the perspective of the campaign is that they still function as medium in the health professionals’ encounter with the at-risk families. So the National Board of Health forms the medium of agreements through the formation of standardized agreement pages, which open up for further manifestations in the relationship between health professionals and families. The element ‘agreement’, in other words, is variable and adaptable to different conditions of interaction between health professional and family.

Moreover, the campaign leaves open the choice of communication medium. This is the case in ‘Spin-the-bottle’ which oscillates between play and pedagogy depending on which field the bottle points to. But it is particularly obvious in the case of the agreement pages. The agreement pages could function as the form for the communication between health professionals and family in relation to rather different media. It could be the medium of power with the form superior (regulator)/inferior (regulated) where the family is defined as the regulated inferior and the professionals as the regulating superiors. In this case, communication is about how health professionals use the agreement pages to regulate the family with regard to its self-regulation according to the health advice. Here, the agreement pages are perceived as a regulatory tool for health professionals as well as for the family. It could be the medium of contract with the form obligation/freedom. In this case, communication would be about making an agreement between health professionals and the family about the family’s self-agreement to transform the health advice into contractual obligations. The agreement page then takes on the quality of standardized agreements, which can be further specified. Moreover, it could be the medium of pedagogy with the form better/worse in terms of learning where the family is conceived as a moldable child who needs to learn about health and where the professionals are seen as instructive health pedagogues. Here, the agreement page becomes a pedagogical illustrative tool. Finally, it could be the medium of play with the form play/‘reality’. The health professionals and the family are then seen as playmates, and the agreement page attains the quality of a game that provides a variety of possibilities for play. In this communication, nothing is what it pretends to be. The health professionals are not simply counselors but invite the families to play through fun and voluntary offers. The health advice is precisely given by Yum-Yum, and while it is good advice it is also fun. Agreements do not represent tedious responsibilities but an agreement game where we fulfill the terms of the agreement in a playful spirit as long as it remains fun. The communication effort of the campaign here relates to a heterogeneity of different alternative media whose choices are not given. It is a campaign that withholds its choice of medium until a recursive attributing of the communication that actually happens around the agreement pages.

It is, however, more complex than this since the campaign does not simply reintroduce the distinction between form and medium so that the choice of medium is ‘decentralized’ and placed in the specific interactions between professional and family. The campaign’s recursive attribution of the medium for communication does not in fact have to confirm the communication’s actual formation of a medium. The campaign is constructed in such a way so that the health professionals can always respond to opposition from families by saying that something else is going on than what the families are saying. A health professional can suggest regulation by using the agreement
pages, and if the family then opposes regulation, he or she is able to argue that they merely represent a voluntary agreement, which the family is invited to make with itself. The communication implies that the agreements constitute voluntary surrender of freedom. And if the family feels that the agreements are too unpleasant, the agreements are really just a play-agreement where it is important to remember that children often find such games fun. A scene for interaction is constructed, therefore, which allows for a constant oscillation among heterogeneous forms of communication. The contract sheets make up a machine of displacement in relation to communicative expectations. The result is that at-risk families never fully know whether they are partaking in play, regulation, negotiation of an agreement, or pedagogically organized learning processes, and each form implies a different selection of expectations, which cannot all be met at the same time. And it is a point in the campaign that seriousness whether defined within the form of agreement, pedagogy, or regulation momentarily turns into play with seriousness. It becomes impossible for the participants to determine whether they are dealing with a moment of seriousness or responsibility or play, particularly because the next moment might be one of reversal. The point is therefore not, that the agreement sheets are just play. The point is that the sheets are designed in such a way that is not possible to determine in advance how they structure expectations. With the help of the agreement sheets the health professionals can always deny what they are doing, retreating to play. The campaign makers have created particular opportunities to get around emerging resistance by the citizens (where the alternative would have been to meet the resistance and recognizing citizens as legitimate opponents).

And it is important to pay attention to what it also means to refer to something as play. When play itself says ‘it is play’, it doubles the world and defines ‘reality’ as that with which we can play. Thus we must assume that the autopoiesis of play defines the campaign as its outside, that is, as what is played. The result is that we all act as we normally do in campaigns, but these actions do not mean what they normally would in a regular campaign. Play as a medium creates the rather peculiar situation that play is in fact only possible when it resists its external manifestation. If the campaign was successful at instrumentally designing play in a way so that it becomes the unambiguous carrier of the campaign message, it is no longer play but power parasiting on power. This means that the campaign loses the sense of voluntariness and dedication, which initially was the reason that the campaign chose play as medium. However, if the campaign is successful at allowing play to be constitutive and recruit participants to its activities, then the campaign message has been turned into something that play plays with and that it can place in parenthesis.

All this seems to point to the fact that the ‘Healthy through Play’ campaign struggles to select play as its medium without violently affecting the very form of the campaign. This is a campaign that does not want to be recognized as campaign, regulation that does not want to be seen as regulation, contracts that do not care for obligations but only freedom, and a pedagogy that seek not to be instructive. The ‘Healthy through Play’ campaign wants neither to be recognized as campaign not to be rejected as such. Perhaps the most probable result is that the campaign itself becomes a game. It is play-campaigning with the benefit of being able to quickly and easily suspend the campaign’s quality of regulation, pedagogy, and obligation if it senses opposition from citizens. However, this causes play to be the dominant form, which places the campaign
in parenthesis as something we are merely playing! The relationship between campaign as form and play as medium is deformed or even becomes reversible so that what used to be form (the campaign) suddenly becomes the medium of play. And this happens while the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries and the National Board of Health continue to play that they are running campaigns.

Conclusion: The cartoon state

Perhaps our conclusion may extend these ideas. Niklas Luhmann, in his book about the welfare state, criticizes a number of ideas about the state as a substantial framework for politics. He reverses the relation and talks about the political system of communication as communicating in a particular code and assigning itself a particular functionality without being tied to a specific locality or set of institutions, people, etc. The political system is everywhere where political communication takes place, that is, through the code of politics. The political system, therefore, is highly differentiated into subsystems or different political cases, participants, etc. The state is not a prescribed framework for politics. Instead, in a differentiated political system, the state becomes the self-description of the political system, that is, the attempt by the political system to describe its unity despite its divisions, but this unity remains a mere semantic artifact for the political system:

The state then does not enjoy the form of an immediately accessible fact, of a section of the world, of the people, of a collection of persons that stand to one another in a relation that needs to be specified further (...) The state is the formula for the self-description of the political system of society. (...) Politics is not determined as state but in reference to the state. (Luhmann 1990: 122-123)

This makes it possible to explore the way in which the political system is constantly struggling with its unity through the description of itself as state. The state becomes a central research object, not as substantial locality but as important political self-description and hence as passport to the political system’s struggle to create its own conditions. It makes a difference whether the political communication shapes itself through reference to a semantics of the constitutional state, the welfare state, or the security state. My question is which unity for the political system is outlined in the ‘Healthy through Play’ campaign? What is the state that the campaign is referring to?

Let me repeat the question from the article’s title: Who is Yum-Yum, who supplies us, in the below picture, with nutritional advice?
Yum-Yum is the consistent reference in the campaign. Yum-Yum is the campaign’s description of itself. Yum-Yum seems to emerge as a semantics of self-description of the political in ‘Healthy through play’. With Yum-Yum, the state is turned into a cartoon character with long plushy ears, widely spaced eyes, and a very large and soft nose. Yum-Yum is cute, friendly, inviting, and above all completely harmless. He is neither adult nor child. Or more precisely: He is an adult who knows what is right and good for everyone, but he is also an innocent child. He is a hybrid between adult and child and between responsibility and innocence. He gives advice. He means well and there are no catches.

This poses certain questions:

- Does the state become a type of game master in such campaigns?
- Or is the state gambled and merely playing that it is a state?
- Is the cartoon state a self-deconstructive state, dissolving its own conditions for being a state?

I do not hold the answers to these questions. In fact, they are probably the political system’s own questions when it organizes campaigns such as ‘Healthy through play’. The cartoon state seems to be a state that gets in the way of itself. It is a state whose impotence consists precisely in the fact that it is state. The state would rather be (civil) society. In order to work as state and have power over the self-relation of it citizens, it
has to look different than a state. The state plays that it is (not) a state and hopes that someone will play along so that it may yet work as state.

This is, obviously, not an innocent game for when the state plays that it is not a state but simply seeks to play with its citizens in a serious way, then its citizens not longer need rights. When the political system describes itself as constitutional state, the self-limitation of the political system vis-à-vis the citizen becomes an unavoidable theme. Describing itself as constitutional state implies protecting the citizen against the state itself. But when the state is drawn as Yum-Yum, how might we begin to describe any need for protection in relation to the citizen? The state describes itself as one that does not take itself seriously as state and therefore cannot take seriously possible opposition from its citizens. There is no reason for opposition when the state is Yum-Yum, so that when citizens do oppose the health-promotion initiatives, they loose their status as subject. The health professionals should not meet opposition by recognizing the opponent. Opposition is something to evade or move around since it is not a sign of a reasonable will (see also Knudsen 2009). Only when the citizen agrees to play along is he or she recognized as subjects with a will and reason. The result is a state without boundaries.

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The game of hospitality

Hanne Knudsen

In current discourse, the family is construed as the basis of the school’s work. Accordingly, the family’s socialisation of the child becomes a governmental task for the school. It is not enough for the school to clarify the exact expectations to the parents; the school needs the parents to imagine all the ways in which what goes on in the family is relevant to the child’s behaviour in school. New technologies are applied to stretch the parents’ imagination. This article presents a case study of a ludic technology used in Danish schools, ‘The responsibility game’, and shows that this technology is used to encourage the parents to see themselves through the eyes of the school: parents are invited to invite the school into the family. While used strategically by the school, the game co-creates new challenges for the school, because it blurs the boundaries between ‘host’ and ‘guest’ in the meeting of school and family.

Introduction

Our story begins one winter’s night at a school in the Danish city of Aarhus. Present at the event are the parents of children who have attended the school for six months. They have been welcomed by the pedagogical leader1 of the school, and together they have sung a Danish children’s song. They have been divided into groups of four or five and are now seated at tables with coffee and cookies, which some of the parents have prepared. On the table there is a game board with game spaces entitled ‘school’, ‘mutual’, and ‘home’. One of the parents holds an envelope containing playing cards that have various statements written on them. She has just picked a card. It reads, ‘Who is responsible for ensuring that the child is free to express his or her beliefs and feelings?’

Let’s leave the question unanswered for a moment and ask the reader to imagine where this card will be placed on the board – and what the answer to the next question in the game will be, which is: ‘What actions can contribute to the realisation of this statement?’

1 In many Danish schools there is a team of leaders, consisting of the headmaster, an administrative leader and a pedagogical leader. The division of tasks varies, but often the pedagogical leader is in charge of laying down pedagogical goals, carrying out evaluations, arranging conversations, meetings and individual coaching with teachers, and having contact to parents.
The questions to be posed here are: Why would a school use a game to organise a meeting with parents? And what does this practice imply as far as governmental ambitions, possibilities and impossibilities are concerned?

Although the case is Danish, the findings and analysis of governmental forms of power have international relevance. The aim of the article is to contribute to a general discussion of how games can function as power, not only by means of governing the self but by means of governing the relation between self and community. What is regulated is not only the will and desire of the single parent but the creation of the community that obliges the parents to take a personal responsibility in the language of the school. The use of a ludic technology can cover the fact that ‘the mutual’ itself is not for discussion.

Schools are currently regarded as depending on parents to create the foundations on which their work with the pupils is based. What goes on in the family is relevant to the school’s possibilities for educating the child, and a managerial ambition evolves concerning the parents’ socialisation of the child. This is the case even though the school cannot be precise about the obligations of the parents; it needs the parents to take an undefined, personal responsibility for the family as an educational space and for the social relations between the pupils in the school class. The school cannot explicitly demand this kind of responsibility from the parents and families; therefore a number of new managerial technologies have evolved. Among them are games, which have the beauty of ambiguity in terms of the status of what is being said. By means of games the school is able to invite the family to invite the school into the family. In the case analysed this invitation creates difficulties concerning how the school can be the host of the meeting with the parents. The question of ‘intervening’ and of ‘mutual’ turns out to be important and difficult. The article shows this and opens up a discussion of the paradoxes and dilemmas for the school on how to maintain the right to define the school at the same time as depending on the parents to participate and commit themselves to the school community. The responsibility game is both an ambitious governmental technology that subjects parents in the language of the school and an ambiguous technology that raises the question of who is committed to what after the game.

Various international studies have already observed how a pedagogical responsibility is addressed to the parents, often described as a creation of a partnership between home and school. Responsibility and partnership is in some studies simply seen as something to strive for (Squelch, 2006). Janet Newman investigates partnerships as a matter of governance, involving the reconfiguration of relationships between the state and civil society, the public and private sectors, citizens and communities. ‘The inclusion of users, communities and citizens in public policy decision-making networks and collaborative projects is of critical importance’ (Newman, 2001: 126). In my analysis of ‘the responsibility game’ I show that the game is not a method for involving parents in decisions concerning the school. The opening of ‘the mutual’ might open up a debate on what ‘the mutual’ involves, and it could be an invitation to a political debate on the

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2 In Danish the concept ‘mutual’ can stand alone. In English the term would be ‘shared’ but I choose to maintain the concept ‘mutual’ because it is a point here that the responsibility is not shared; it is not described as possible to divide the responsibility between home and school.
relationship between the self and the community. Instead the parents are invited to play the game of being involved.

In other studies, efforts to turn parents into responsible citizens are seen as a part of a governmentality regime. Partnerships are not only a matter of supporting the child’s learning processes but also a matter of governing the family (Franklin et al., 1998; Newman, 2001: 154-160). Nikolas Rose writes about responsibilisation of the family (Rose, 1999: 74), and as he points out, ‘such a moralising ethico-politics tends to incite a “will to govern” which imposes no limits upon itself’ (Rose, 1999: 192). With regard to the reading pledge included in home-school contracts, he has this to say: ‘In what other politics would elected politicians seek to use the apparatus of the law to require parents to read to their children for a fixed period each day?’ (Rose, 1999: 193). My point here differs from Rose’s in several ways: What I analyse is not ‘the apparatus of law’ but interactions framed as a game. And the expectations of the parents do not take the form of requirements but of an invitation to the parents to see the family in an educational gaze. And what is being governed is not only the self and the self’s relation to itself – but the self’s relation to the community, ‘the mutual’ of home and school, and the creation of the mutual responsibility.

The critical literature on games and play as a managerial tool is mainly concerned with private organizations (e.g. Kinnie et al., 2000; Kociatkiewicz, 2000; Fleming and Spicer, 2002; Meisiek and Hatch, 2008; Fleming, 2009). Only a few articles are explicitly concerned with games or play in public organizations, among them Nicole Renee Baptiste who shows that fun and play activities in organizations do not necessarily mean that the employees, in the analysed case, the managers, have fun, because the circumstances do not allow it: ‘The results highlight a silence in the fun at work literature around the conditions of fun…’ (Baptiste, 2009: 609). My focus is not so much fun, whether it actually is funny, boring or depressing, as much as games that challenge borders. In the article ‘Dionysus at Work? The Ethos of Play and the Ethos of Management’ (Costea et al., 2005) the authors analyse the new ethics and imperative of self-work and look into the changing borders of work/leisure, work/play, seriousness/fun, economy/culture. My focus is on the border public organization/citizen, which only few studies are concerned with (see Andersen, this issue; Andersen, 2009; Knudsen, 2010). I am interested in the managerial ambition of responsibilisation of the parents and how this ambition both is powerful and produces powerlessness. In his article in this issue, Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen shows how ludic technologies are used for responsibilisation of citizens concerning their health. Parallel to my interest in this article he investigates what these attempts do to the state, asking whether it turns itself into a cartoon state.

My interest here is how ludic technologies make it difficult for the school to both call for personal responsibility from the parents and avoid their interference in the school’s internal affairs. I shall analyse the responsibility game as a technology of the self, turning the parents into responsible subjects concerning their parental role. But the game shall also be analysed as a technology of the mutual, turning the parents into responsible to the school community. Drawing on the concepts of translation and hospitality from Jacques Derrida I analyse the interactions on this parents’ evening as a matter of transformation and shifts between different languages and different forms of
communication. Before analysing the game I shall outline the current discourse on parents’ responsibility in a Danish context (for an analysis of the relationship between parents and school in a British context, see Bridges, 2010).

**Current discourses on parents’ responsibility**

Over the past twenty years state-funded schools in Denmark have shifted from single-disciplinary programs towards cross-disciplinary program, and at the same time learning has shifted in the direction of second-order learning. Knowledge is important but is no longer considered to have durability over time. Therefore, it does not suffice for children to learn a great deal. They have to primarily learn to learn, which also entails learning to see themselves from a learning perspective. This is often referred to as ‘being responsible for own learning’. This means that the school develops a greater sensitivity towards other types of competencies than strictly disciplinary ones. Social and personal competencies become central to teaching. This has a variety of implications. First of all, it means a much more differentiated concept of pedagogy in school, where traditional teacher-controlled classroom teaching gives way to groupwork, projects, personal presentations, and co-operation across classes, grades, and disciplines (Juelskjaer, forthcoming). The new forms are intended to support the pupils’ personal and social development, but paradoxically they presuppose a great number of personal and social competences in order to be effective. The pupils must learn the different rules that apply in different teaching methods. Sometimes they are expected to act as quiet listeners; other times they need to be engaged and involved, and still other times to work together. This means that they need to be able to oscillate between many different pupil roles. And it also means that the family’s socialisation of the children comes to play a much greater role (Knudsen, 2010). The school develops an interest in the families’ internal creation of themselves as families. The responsibility of the families in relation to the school is displaced from specific responsibilities, such as making sure that the children show up at school and ensuring that their homework gets done, towards the creation of the family as a sound space of development and learning for the children. It is not only the children who are expected to relate to themselves pedagogically. The family has to do the same.

These ambitions for the family’s inside relations create a need for managing the family. This is a problem for the school, because the family fundamentally resides outside the formal domain of the school. Traditional technologies such as fifteen-minute informative consultations with the teacher as an expert (MacLure, 2003) do not initiate the desired responsibility-taking (Knudsen, 2010). In these technologies the community, the mutual responsibility of school and home, is taken for granted. They primarily serve the purpose of informing parents of their children’s progress. The meetings are an invitation to parents to support the school, both symbolically by confirming the authority of the teacher and through supporting the learning that takes place within the family such as homework help and supervision. The responsibility of the parents is given and the challenge met by the consultations is how to oblige the parents to realise the responsibility. The question posed is ‘Did you take the responsibility for reading with your child today?’. Given by the new ambitions the question posed today would be more like ‘Did you take the responsibility for turning your family into a learning
environment?’. The school is not certain of the parents’ responsibility or of the school’s right to define the parents’ responsibility. So it is not only a matter of realising the responsibility but of defining the responsibility and creating ‘the mutual’ that obliges the parents in certain ways. Other technologies that are currently being employed as a way to extend the school into the family include technologies of reflection and self-development such as the family class (Knudsen, 2009) or parental class (Gillies, 2005) and technologies that authorise parents to define expectations for other parents, e.g. through group discussions or policies regarding bullying, or values outlined by the school board or other parent groups. There are also self-binding technologies such as parent contracts (Andersen, 2004; Vincent-Jones, 2006), parenting agreements and home-school agreements.

The responsibility game

This article focuses on a game entitled ‘the responsibility game’, which is used in the Municipality of Aarhus, Denmark, in order to teach parents of preschool children to take responsibility. I observed parents engaged in playing this game one night at a school, and my empirical material consists of written material (Municipality of Aarhus, 2003), audio recordings and observations from this event.

Let us return to the above-mentioned winter’s night. The statement from the envelope, ‘who is responsible for ensuring that the child is free to express his or her beliefs and feelings?’, was placed in the middle square on the game board entitled ‘mutual’. The next round of the game involves the parents discussing what actions might turn the statement into reality. In the group that I was observing, the parents arrived at the conclusion that one possible action could be ‘eating dinner together as a family’. This would allow parents to share over dinner with their spouses and children their own opinions and feelings, e.g. in relation to a difficult day at work, which would let the children see that it is natural to express one’s beliefs and feelings.

This evening was one in a series of evenings that served at least two purposes: To establish and support a sense of community among parents of children in the preschool, and to provide parents with ideas concerning what their new responsibility as parents of school-age children might include.
The game board on the tables

As already mentioned, there were 32 statements placed in an envelope, which the parents were asked to place in one of the three rings. Some of the 32 statements read:

Who is responsible for ensuring:

1. That the child is not hungry in school?
2. That the child sits down when the bell rings?
3. That the child has the things he or she needs (pencil case, books, gym clothes, etc.)?
4. That the child understands messages directed at the whole class and is able to act accordingly?
5. That the child writes down homework in the homework journal?
6. That the child learns?
7. That the child is able to handle conflicts with others?
8. That the child learns that an agreement is an agreement?
9. That the child learns perseverance?
10. That the child feels good about him or herself?
11. That the child learns to collaborate?
12. That the child is able to lose games with good grace?
13. That the child develops creativity and imagination?
14. That the child has happy days?
15. That the child learns to be a good friend?
16. That the child learns to take responsibility?

'Round one’ of the game entailed a parent drawing a card, reading it aloud, and reflecting on its statement. Subsequently the group then discussed the statement and reached an agreement about where the card should be placed on the board. ‘Round two’ asked the parents to prioritise a statement from each pile and place the rest of the cards back in the envelope. Each group was then asked to add comments to each of the priorities, describing several specific actions that would contribute to turning the statements into reality. As the pedagogical leader described it:

The task is to describe an action, or perhaps several actions, which might turn the statement on the note into reality. If we take the statement ‘that the child feels good about him or herself’ – what would that take, depending on who is responsible – what should be done by the people who are responsible for ensuring that the child feels good about itself? How do we make the child feel good about him or herself? Is it by scratching his or her back, by giving him or her a lollipop every Thursday? – Specific actions like that.

Finally, each group had to present in plenum their conclusions about priorities and possible actions. These presentations were open to questions from the audience and were later written up and emailed to the parents and given to the class teacher, who

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3 Here, the events of the evening diverge from the written material from the Municipality of Aarhus describing the concept of the game, in which it is suggested that parents choose three cards from the ‘mutual’ pile and discuss what the parents and the school respectively can contribute to the joint effort (Municipality of Aarhus, 2003: 2.22). This might have made it less urgent to discuss the school’s responsibility – which very much became the focus of this evening’s discussion.
wrote them down in the class journal and committed herself to ‘following up on them once in a while’. In this way, the suggested actions were ‘added to the minutes’ in ‘the class journal’.

Technology of the self – and of the mutual

The objective of the responsibility game is to encourage the establishment of families and a parental group that are willing to assume responsibilities. According to the pedagogical leader, almost all of the statements ended up in the ‘mutual’ category, which is a sign of the game’s strength:

They almost always reach the conclusion that ‘wow, we really share the responsibility for almost everything that happens in school’, and I think that that awareness is really important. There are certain things that we clearly have to provide as a school. But that is precisely a question of content. If we agree that we help each other with those basic things, then it works out really well. (Pedagogical leader)

The ‘we’ of the above quote is by no means unambiguous. ‘The basic things’ encompass areas for which the parents are responsible, whereas ‘the content’ is the responsibility of the school. The responsibility game is designed to ensure that parents take responsibility for the basic things, the prerequisites for learning. They have to become parents with a responsibility for turning the family into a part of the learning space and into an important prerequisite for the school’s work – instead of just being parents.

The main point concerning technology of the self is the question of what the subjects are invited to recognise themselves as – and what they are to transform themselves into (Foucault, 1997). The transformation is one from a parent who is not conscious of being a school parent into a parent with the responsibility that results from being a school parent. The transformation involves parents seeing themselves as participants in the logic, or in the language, of the school. The technology is an invitation to translate from the language of the school into the language of the family. The parents should recognise themselves as parents and translate the statements first into their own language and then into actions. Here I shall draw on the concept of translation from Jacques Derrida to complement the concept of technology of the self. Derrida states that translation is always also a transformation:

…the translator must assure the survival, which is to say the growth, of the original. Translation augments and modifies the original, which, insofar as it is living on, never ceases to be transformed and to grow. (Derrida, 1985: 122, italics in original)

Translation perceived as a one-to-one relationship is not possible because translation is translation in the sense of a change from one language, context or role to another. Translation is not, therefore, a question of reciting a message or acting on behalf of someone else. Translation entails that something new is created and that one acts independently.

Translations take place in group discussions and in plenum. One of the groups discussed the statement ‘that the child develops creativity and imagination’.
Mother 2: The child cannot learn something at home that he or she does not see.
Father 2: If there aren’t any coloured pencils and scissors…

[...] 
Mother 1: I’d like us to agree on placing this in the mutual category, because even if we don’t do it and don’t have the energy, I assume we all would like to be involved in it. It could also be cooking. It could be many things.
Father 2: Of course they should be involved in baking cookies and that kind of thing, so I also believe that it is a mutual concern.

[...] 
Mother 1: But you have to think about it sometimes. Otherwise they sit and watch TV while you cook dinner. It’s easier that way. That way you can chop vegetables in peace.
Father 2: And the TV isn’t such a bad thing, but it is true that it mustn’t be the only thing.
Mother 1: It shouldn’t be used as a place to park the children.
Father 1: That’s what it’s like with everything.
Mother 2: We also sit down and watch TV at night because we’re tired.

Initially, ‘Mother 2’ is considering whether or not to place the statement in the ‘school’ category, but ‘Mother 1’ argues that the parents should agree to see the task as a mutual responsibility and hence also as a task for and within the family. By translating what creativity and imagination means, from immediate school-related connotations – scissors and coloured pencils – to ‘cooking’ and ‘cookies’, it becomes possible for her to consider it a task for which she is able to assume responsibility. Subsequently, the parents discuss whether or not children should help to do the cooking, how much or how little TV to watch, etc. Through this translation process, the different parents’ norms are negotiated, tested, and moulded towards a consensus within the group. The third form of translation that can be traced in the quote above is the parents’ reflection on their everyday lives based on the school’s norms for learning: How is it possible to turn cooking and other activities into an area of learning for the child? How much television is it reasonable for the child to watch – in relation to the time it needs to develop? Even if parents cannot all cope with the responsibility of helping the child to develop his or her creativity and imagination, ought they not to be doing it?

One example of how the parents can turn themselves into responsible school parents concerned the statement ‘that the child becomes a good friend’. The parents in one group discussed the importance of talking about social relations and norms for spending time with their child. Another group suggested playgroups that included everyone in the class, organized by the parents and thereby including the parents as hosts for the children in the class. This not only allows responsibility to be translated into action within the individual family, but also means that responsibility can be assumed by regarding the parents of individual pupils as a single entity representing the entire class. One suggestion in response to the statement ‘that the child is free to express his or her beliefs and feelings’ was (as already mentioned) for the family to have dinner together and for the parents to act as role models by expressing their own difficulties and concerns. Possibly divergent norms are negotiated into mutual norms, in the same way that a general responsibility is translated into the individual family.

Interrupted translations, power and resistance

Translations are not always ‘smooth’; sometimes mistranslations, breaks and interruptions occur. Michel Foucault suggests using resistance as a chemical catalyst so
as to bring to light power relations (Foucault, 2000: 329; Fleming, 2002). I am inspired
by this use of the counter concept as a catalyst, and I use the concept of interrupted
translations to see what ‘smooth translations’ would look like. My empirical material is
social technologies in use, played out in interactions and not only described in
pamphlets, and here I use breaks and turns in interactions as catalysts to capture
regularities.

**Interrupted translations: Play or confession**

Gregory Bateson proposes a definition of play:

> Expanded, the statement ‘this is play’ looks something like this: These actions in which we now
> engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote… The playful nip
denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite. (Bateson, 2000: 180)

The responsibility game is not a game with very clear and fixed rules, and moreover,
before the game begins, there is a round in which groups of parents relate to each other
their child’s experiences of starting school. It becomes a question of an ‘evolving
system of interaction’ (Bateson 2000: 192), which means that the participants cannot
predict the ways in which other people will link up to what they say. Once again, the
question is whether we are *playing* parents or whether we are committed to a reality that
remains in play. One father (father 2) talks about his daughter like this:

> Laura hasn’t had any difficulties related to starting school. She has loved school from day one…
> It’s great every morning when you say ‘time for school’ that it is something you love, right, it’s a
> wonderful thing… And I might add that we are in the middle of a divorce situation, Dorthe and
> me. And Laura knows all about it because we talk and tell her what’s going to happen. So we
don’t hide anything from anybody. I think that also helps her. So far we haven’t experienced any
> problems of any kind. I don’t foresee that there will be any, either.

Next in line is a mother, who does not fully buy into the father’s story about his happy
daughter:

> Mother 2: One day I came right after, I believe you’d just been there, right? (Father 2: yes) And
she was sitting on the coach all by herself (Father 2: yes). Then I said, ‘Why are you sitting here?’
And she was sad because she had to get rid of her dog (Father 2: yes, that’s right, that’s right). So
she was a little sad that day. So we talked – I was even ten minutes late for work (laughter),
because we had to talk about it, (laughter), we just had to (Father 2: yes, yes). And then it came
out that her father and mother were getting divorced.

Here, the communication changes from one that we might characterise as ‘playing and
pretending to be good parents of happy children’ to a mode of ‘here we talk about
feelings and problems’. We can say that there has been an ‘interruption’ of the
translation because the form of the communication changes from play to confession.

**Interrupted translations: Play or decision**

The very design of the evening comprises interrupted translations, when the group’s
independently conceived ideas for actions are written down, first on a whiteboard and
later in the class journal. The game stimulates the parents’ imaginations with respect to
how their own television consumption, board games, reactions to disabled people, etc.
impact the shaping of the child’s prerequisites for learning. It assumes the form of play:
The informal talk and organized play around a board game and cards signal that ‘this is fun!’ At the same time, however, it is not simply in order to have fun that the parents are gathered for two and a half hours. At some point, the fun becomes serious. The signal, then, is that ‘this is a commitment!’ The groups were told to present their ‘conclusions’, which were subsequently written down and emailed to all the parents and the classroom teacher, who – as mentioned earlier – committed to ‘following up on this once in a while’. The prioritisations and ideas that the parents presented changed status from being an element of a game to having the character of a decision. Similarly, the parents changed status from being in a process of formation, both as individual parents and as a group, to having responsibilities.

In the form of play, the subject is played forth while playing. In play, one is not a predefined subject. Play turns the player into a subject by offering the player the possibility of doubling herself. It is different in decision communication. In decision communication the subject is presupposed as preceding the decision. A decision refers to a subject outside the decision to whom the decision can be assigned and who can be observed as decision maker. (Andersen, 2009: 84)

What the school wants to get out of the parents’ evening are decisions that may serve as the building blocks for the school as an organization. The school attempts to move outside the school and manage on the basis of the families’ self-reflection and install learning as part of that reflection. I argue that this is only possible because it takes the form of play: It is meant to be fun. But at the same time, it is not just meant as fun since specific actions are suggested in plenum and minutes are taken. The objective is thus collectively binding decisions. The communication shifts from assuming the form of play to the form of decision (Andersen, 2009; Knudsen, 2010).

Interrupted translations: The mutual and the problem of interference

The pedagogical leader expresses the goal and the outcome of the evening like this:

It makes it apparent to the parents over the course of the evening the extent to which it is a mutual task. And we are not able to run the school if we do not collaborate… If we agree to help each other with those basic things, then it works out really well. (Pedagogical leader)

This indicates a ‘we’ consisting of both parents and school that can agree. However, the parents are not allowed to take responsibility for the prerequisites for learning that are created by the school. Because, as the pedagogical leader says: ‘there are certain things that we clearly have to provide as a school, but that is precisely a question of content.’ Some of the parents have not understood that they are only supposed to talk about things going on in the family; they assume that if they are to take responsibility, they can also contribute to the part of the ‘mutual’ concerning the school.

In their presentation, one of the groups made suggestions aimed at both the school and the home. In response to the statement ‘that the child feels good about him or herself’, the parents suggested that the teachers should talk to each other to find out how the children were getting on in different subject areas, learning about their strengths in contexts different from their own. This division of ‘mutual’ into a ‘both-and’ (or ‘shared’), with parents making specific suggestions for the school, was passed over in silence. Another mother called for further training of the teachers in project-based work in the young classes because she had noticed problems among older pupils, who found
it difficult to work independently on projects. The mother thus identified areas of prerequisites for learning within the school. ‘We already pay a lot of attention to this’, responded the pedagogical leader, without revealing any details of how this is done, thereby underlining that the responsibility for defining the school’s responsibilities resides with the school.

In the final presentation, several parents pointed to the fact that it was difficult to unambiguously designate any of the 32 statements as the school’s responsibility. There was a clear expectation from the parents that the responsibility of the school was up for discussion as well. However, it became obvious in the concluding presentations that it had been difficult for the parents to place anything in the ‘school’ category. One group said:

It was difficult for us to place any responsibility with the school alone, but we agreed that it had to be the school’s responsibility that the children play well during recess (laughter from the audience).

Another group said:

We aren’t really very proud of it [the card that they placed in the ‘school’ category, HK], but there were only two cards left. And therefore we have ‘that the child writes down homework in the homework journal’ (laughter from the audience). It was a choice between two evils (laughter from the audience).

The concept of ‘mutual’ only pertains to the school to a minimal extent: ‘mutual’ responsibilities represent the family’s responsibility in relation to the school. This, however, was rejected by a couple of parents in the final plenum. The pedagogical leader asked at one point:

Did you openly say ‘why are those school things not written down anywhere?’, that is, ‘there is an expectation of the school we might have but which simply was not there’? And which you wanted to come up with for yourself?

The mother who was asked this question responded:

No, we actually did not. It isn’t the school’s responsibility alone that the children are motivated to learn. That’s something they need to be given at home: Interest and drive and willingness and things like that. The fighting spirit, so to speak. If we shut them down at home, what exactly is it we expect them to want to do here?

This mother, accordingly, accepted that what is at stake are prerequisites in the form of interest, drive and willingness, and that these are prerequisites that the children should be given at home. But she also says, ‘It isn’t the school’s responsibility alone…’, thereby acknowledging that the school has a responsibility as well.

Another mother felt that there should be a general statement directed at the school: ‘To teach my child professional competencies.’ Another parent supported this with the question: ‘Then what is your responsibility? I assume it is to organize teaching?’ The pedagogical leader responded:

I think that, on behalf of the classroom teacher, I can assure you that the question of professional competencies is going to be handled. We guarantee that, and it happens in strict accordance with
the Ministry of Education’s paragraphs and objectives and all that, it really does weigh heavy on
the teacher’s consciousness, so you don’t have to worry about that.

Thus, it is clearly marked that it is the school’s responsibility to define the school’s
responsibilities. At the same time, it is also the school’s responsibility to define the framework for the parents’ definitions of their responsibility. Through the responsibility
game, the parents are supported in their effort to recognise their own responsibility in
relation to the school. Despite the fact that ‘school’, ‘home’, and ‘mutual’ are all in
play, there is no initiation of a dialogue in which a disagreement can arise about who is
responsible for what, or through which parents may air their opinions about the
teacher’s practice.

An attempt is made to make the parents responsible – but without the opportunity to
take responsibility for a whole, because the ‘mutual’ only covers the parents’ part, not
the school’s. The game establishes the possibility of expecting that the school’s responsibility can be discussed. The rather heavy-handed way in which the pedagogical
leader shuts down any attempts at such a discussion (with reference to the highest
authority, the Ministry of Education) indicates that a lot seems to be at stake right here.
The pedagogical leader is made to ‘defend’ the school against parental interference.

The game of hospitality

In his books ‘Of Hospitality’ and ‘On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness’, Jacques
Derrida discusses the question of how to limit the hospitality of France in connection to
refugees and other foreigners coming to France. I use the concept of hospitality from
Derrida as a way to describe the impossibilities of the responsibility game. According to
Derrida, there are several impossibilities concerning hospitality. One is that hospitality
will always consist of both the unconditional law of unlimited hospitality and the
conditioned and conditional laws of hospitality, the rights and obligations. ‘These two
regimes of law, of the law and the laws, are thus both contradictory, antinomic and
inseparable’ (Derrida, 2000a: 79). Hospitality is both the door (if it even makes sense
that there is a door) being opened to everybody without any questions or demands and
the questions and demands necessary to hospitality because the limitless hospitality is
not possible. The questions concerning who to let in, who to reject, and on which
conditions – are down to a political decision.

Another impossibility of hospitality is that by welcoming the guest at the same time, the
host affirms that the right to welcome and the home belongs to the host. ‘It does not
seem to me that I am able to open up or offer hospitality, however generous, without
reaffirming: this is mine, I am at home, you are welcome in my home’ (Derrida, 2000b:
14). If the host is not the master in his own home he cannot welcome the guest. ‘…the
host, he who offers hospitality, must be the master in his house, he (male in the first
instance) must be assured of his sovereignty over the space and goods he offers or
opens to the other as stranger.’ (ibid.)

The questions in this connection are: What are the laws of hospitality? Who is the host
and who is the stranger/guest? What is the ‘mutual’? And who creates the laws of
hospitality? The school invites the parents to come to the school, to bring their own
cake, and to talk with each other, with the leader and teachers – and even take pride in refraining from talking to the parents. The teachers and the pedagogical leader stress how positive it is that they are not needed in the discussions during the event, how good it is that parents display a ‘great desire to talk around the tables’ – amongst themselves – that the school’s professionals are simply facilitators and ‘game masters’. The management of the families cannot take the form of giving orders, which are then translated and followed by the parents. In order for the school to reach into the families, it has to reach out through an invitation to dialogue. However, this dialogue is not a dialogue in the sense of seeking to understand someone else’s perspective. The dialogue is an occasion of self-reflection. The objective of the dialogue is described in the written material as allowing ‘parents, teachers, and educators to test their ideas and opinions and to listen to others in order to better understand their own opinions’ (Municipality of Aarhus, 2003: 2.1). The dialogue is not a dialogue between two parties but a self-dialogue initiated by the other. The school welcomes the parents but with the ambition of saying ‘this is not mine; this is our mutual concern – defined by me’, thereby making a dialogue on ‘yours’ and ‘mine’ impossible.

The school is the one inviting but it is not obvious that the school fulfils the obligations of being a host, and this makes good sense because the school, in the current discourse, is described as depending on parents providing prerequisites for the school’s work. At the same time the school cannot put forth explicit and exact expectations for the parents but depends on them to determine which action could promote the prerequisites. The school is described as depending on the parents, and the parents’ responsibility is open. The responsibility game stimulates the imagination of the parents concerning their responsibility and actions without opening a dialogue between home and school.

So the invitation to play the responsibility game is actually an invitation to the parents to invite the school into the family – on the school’s conditions and in the language of the school. The invitation could be expressed like this: ‘We need you to invite us into your family, because in the family the prerequisites for our work are created.’

The meeting takes place in the language of the school but with the ambition of obliging the parents to take responsibility. What are the chances of the parents being obliged? A contract or agreement is only possible if it takes place in two languages at the same time: ‘If it takes place in only one tongue, whether it be mine or the other’s, there is no contract possible’ (Derrida, 1985: 125). In order to have an agreement, there must be a simultaneous ‘yes’ in two languages at once. If the school needs parents to demonstrate active participation and to show that they are willing to take responsibility, the school has to allow the parents to express themselves in their own language, since ‘if one is not responsible when one speaks the other’s tongue, one is left off the hook in advance’ (ibid.: 124).

The school comes to depend upon the parent group’s ability to arrive at a definition of their responsibility and to mutually commit each other. At the same time, the school’s authority is put at stake as it seeks to use the responsibility game to extend its authority to include internal family relations – but without making this explicit and therefore open to parental acceptance (or rejection). It becomes impossible for the school to sustain its own authority. It sets the scene for the parents’ mutual dialogue but does not participate...
as a partner in the dialogue. And the responsibility game makes it possible to always claim that it is just fun, for both sender and recipient, for both the power-superior and the power-inferior in the relationship.

The ambition with the responsibility game can be described as inviting the family to invite the school into the family. In this distribution of roles between host and guest is it possible to assume responsibility for the responsibility game? Is it possible to assume responsibility for the way that parents may assume responsibility and what the norm should be for the ‘good parent’? One of the points of the game is that it opens up the possibility of different forms of norm and subject formation rather than a traditional description of roles (e.g. in job descriptions, rules, and orders). This renders the formation of norms more difficult to control. The responsibility game distributes the formation of norms in at least four different ways:

1. One element of the formation of norms and thus leadership depends upon the design of the game: Which statements the parents are expected to respond to, the design of the game board, groupings, conversational forms, shifts between different elements, the course of the game, etc.

2. Another element has to do with the very fact that it is a game. A game has a specific internal logic, which includes the possibility of competing, cheating, winning and losing. One participant thought that it would amount to cheating if the parents took all 32 cards out of the envelope and prioritised them instead of ‘following the rules’ and only prioritising the cards that were picked at random.

3. A third element resides with the ‘game master’, who in this case is a pedagogical leader. His or her way of dividing parents into groups, summing up, following or deviating from the description of the concept helps to shape the conditions for creating fictions.

4. A fourth element has to do with the participants and the interaction itself. The mother who comments on the father’s description of himself and his daughter establishes what has been said and produces a fiction about the good parent. Part of the right to interpret and judge is located with the participant and in the interaction.

Concluding remarks

The boundary between school and family is not primarily determined through superior decisions (in recommendations, regulations, principles, etc.) that bind the future through mutual expectations. Rather, the boundary between school and family is negotiated through interactions with the parties involved and with the prospect of an open and imagined future or present (Juelskjær et al., 2011). One might also say that the political act of determining the boundary between school and family is transposed from superior decisions in defined forums to being carried out in numerous interactions, facilitated by social technologies like games.

The responsibility game aims at turning the parents into responsible subjects. At the same time, however, the responsibility has to be taken in the language of the school. The parents are not given the chance to formulate new cards or to have opinions on e.g.
teaching methods, and so there is an established limit to the openness. The parents are invited into the school; at the same time they are supposed to keep out. They become a monster, both situated inside and outside the school (for an analysis of how this is handled through role plays with teachers and an actor playing ‘the parent’, see Knudsen, 2007).

Seeing itself as depending on parents’ non-defined contribution, the school needs the parents to describe themselves and the family in educational terms. The school depends on the family. Benjamin Baez and Susan Talburt analyse how the pamphlets ‘Helping your Child Series’ from the US Department of Education seemingly empower the parent as teacher, extending the school into the home, positioning the teacher as depending on the parents: ‘The expert here is positioned as needing help’ (Baez and Talburt, 2008: 37). The expert is not only positioned as needing help, I would say, but also as depending on the parents to create the preconditions of the expert’s work. Moreover, in the current ideology of differentiation, the authority of the teacher rests on the confirmation of the pupil and the parents (Bjerg, 2011). Justine Pors points in her analysis of the current political demand for a strengthening of the culture of evaluation in schools to the fact that the paradoxical conditions for governing produce a power regime of indecisiveness (Pors, 2009: 210). This indecisiveness is not turning smaller by the use of games and play.

The game, which in its playful way opens up for new forms of subjectivity and normativity, makes it difficult for the school to take responsibility for the way in which collaboration with parents takes place. It becomes difficult to assume responsibility for the responsibility game because the formation of norms has been distributed – onto the design of the game, the game master, and the interaction among participants. What initially seems like a ‘clever’ and powerful technology, committing parents to playgroups or to having dinner with the family, runs the risk of letting the parents off the hook in advance. And it runs the risk of depriving the school of the possibility of being the host. The conditions of impossibility can be described as the school inviting the parents to invite the school into the family, without interfering in the school themselves. The parents are given an invitation that cannot be rejected – because it is only a game. And the teachers and leaders of the school have difficulties in assuming the responsibility for being the host – because it is only a game and because they need the parents to be the host.

The game turns out to be both a clever managerial technology, interfering in relations in the family, and a challenge to the school’s possibility for taking responsibility for being the host of the meeting between school and family.

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Poker phases: Draw, Stud and Hold’Em as play-forms of capitalism

Ole Bjerg

abstract

The subject of the article is the history of poker. It explores how different structural variations of the game have evolved and how different types of poker have been dominant at different periods in history. There are three main forms of poker: Draw, Stud and Hold’Em. In the article, it is demonstrated how the three forms emerge and become the most popular form of poker at three different periods in history. It identifies structural homologies between the historical development of poker and key elements in the manifestation of capitalism at different times in history.

Introduction

Poker is the laboratory of capitalism. (McDonald, 1950: 23)

When we look at a piece of art, read a piece of literature, watch a film, or listen to a piece of music, it is commonplace to think of these as cultural expressions of the social and historical context in which they are created. Art, literature, film and music are readily recognized as mediums of the Zeitgeist. Poker and other gambling games are rarely thought of in the same fashion. At best, they are considered to be meaningless entertainment, at worst self-destructive vices.

I would, however, argue that poker is a cultural expression in line with art, literature, film, etc. The sudden popularity of poker in recent years demonstrates the rich cultural resonance of the game. Poker is a game of money. As such, the cultural resonance of the game has to do with the way poker is related to capitalism. When so many people find poker interesting, it is because the game has an eminent capacity to capture a set of existential conditions of life in contemporary capitalism and offer these to the players in a form that allows them to explore, challenge, and play with these conditions (see also Bjerg, 2011).

The subject of this article is the history of poker. We shall be exploring how different structural variations of the game have evolved and how different types of poker have been dominant at different periods in history. Our interest, however, is not the particular history of poker in isolation but rather the relation between poker and capitalism. There are three main forms of poker: Draw, Stud and Hold’Em. In this article, I will show
how the three forms emerge and become the most popular form of poker during three different phases in history. I will also identify structural homologies between the historical development of poker and key elements in the functioning of capitalism at different times in history.

Games and society

The investigation of the relation between poker and capitalism invariably involves the more general question of the relation between games and society. In proposing a program for a sociology of games, Roger Callois remarks: ‘It is not absurd to try diagnosing a civilization in terms of the games that are especially popular there’ (1958: 83). There is something curious about the formulation of the remark. Instead of just saying: ‘It is meaningful to diagnose a civilization in terms of the games that are especially popular there’, Callois inserts into the sentence ‘not absurd’ and ‘to try’. Besides stressing the sociological importance of games, it is as if he wants to express, simultaneously, a certain hesitance about the program and also already admit to an imminent risk of analytical failure. We find a similar ambivalence in Johan Huizinga’s approach to the study of games. On the one hand, he says: ‘All play means something’. However, he also says: ‘[T]he fun of playing, resists all analysis, all logical interpretation’ (Huizinga, 1938: 3-4).

The ambivalence found in both Callois and Huizinga indicates that the relation between games and society is anything but straightforward. Games are indeed rich in cultural meaning and thus an obvious object of sociological and philosophical analysis. At the same time, games are almost by definition also utterly meaningless. This is precisely the reason why they are fun and seductive. The analysis of the relation between poker and capitalism in this article is heavily inspired by Baudrillard’s thinking about of games. Baudrillard provides a conception of the relation between games and society as follows: ‘The rule functions as the parodic simulacrum of the law’ (Baudrillard, 1979: 157). The strength of this conception is that it retains the abovementioned ambivalence by understanding the sociological significance of games as a subtraction of meaning rather than a supplement of meaning. This solves the riddle of how games can be meaningful in relation to society while being meaningless in themselves.

In Baudrillard’s conception, games are governed by rules, society is governed by law. The difference between rules and laws is that the rule does not provide any justification for itself. The rule is an offer. You may choose to enter the game and follow the rule. Or, you may choose not to. The rule makes no attempt to force or persuade you to participate. The law, in contrast, comes with a supplement of justification. The law not only tells you what to do. It also provides reasons why you should do it. The law is compulsory whereas the rule is voluntary. The law is embedded in ideology whereas the rule presents itself in a naked form with no ideological aspirations. The sociological significance of a game lies in the way that it mimics certain features of the laws in society without reproducing their ideological superstructure. This is what Baudrillard means by ‘parodic simulacrum’. The following analysis aims to demonstrate how poker functions as a parodic simulacrum of capitalism.
Poker is not representative of capitalist society as a whole. Instead, poker seems to emulate select features of capitalist society. What makes poker so interesting as an object of sociological study is the game’s capacity to pick out precisely those features of capitalist society that are emblematic at different points in history. Hence, the following account of the succession of Draw, Stud and Hold’Em is also an account of the way that poker relates to the frontier, the factory and the financial market as paradigmatic moments in the history of capitalism.

The analysis of poker is of course only one among a multiple of possible genealogies of gambling games. As the following exposition demonstrates, the genealogy of poker is mainly connected to a particular American form of capitalism. Hence, the development of poker from being essentially an American game to its current status as a truly global phenomenon marks perhaps also the globalisation of a particular American variant of capitalism.

**Poker at the frontier of capitalism**

The primary characteristic of a game of poker is the ‘vying principle’ by which players bet as to who holds the strongest hand (Parlett, 1991). In poker, players do not ‘play’ their cards as in whist, rummy or most other cards games. Instead, the betting action makes up the actual playing and money rather than cards are the actual instruments of the game. Hands may be won either by showing down the strongest hand or by intimidating other players into folding their hands before showdown. This introduces the possibility of bluffing into the game, which is also an intrinsic element of any form of poker. Another defining feature of poker is the assembling of hands into five-card combinations, which are then ordered hierarchically based on their statistical likelihood, e.g. three-of-a-kind being stronger than two pairs or a full house being stronger than a flush. These two principles combine in a number of different ways constituting different varieties of poker.

The origins of poker are not accurately recorded in history but the game is speculated to have evolved from European ‘vying games’ such as English Brag, French Bouillotte, Italian Primera, Spanish Mus, and perhaps in particular the German game of Poch, which would account for the etymological roots of poker (Parlett, 1991: 86-89). Modern poker first emerged in the area around New Orleans in the beginning of the 19th century (Parlett, 1991: 105-115; Schwartz, 2006: 248-249).

Poker was first played in the very simple form of Flat Poker, where each player is dealt five cards out of a twenty-card deck (A-K-Q-J-10). There is only a single betting round followed by a showdown if more than one player is left in the pot. Obviously, this was a very primitive form of poker with no use for probability theory and very little information from which to deduce the content of opponents’ hands other than possible physical tells revealing a strong hand or a bluff. Furthermore, in the early days of poker, when the game was played in the saloons of the Wild West and on the Mississippi river boats, cheating was a common and almost integrated part of the game (Findlay, 1986: 47-48; Lears, 2003: 159). Flat poker is mostly a game of chance and bluff but even at this early stage, poker was also a game of skills. The skills required in order to succeed
at the game were not so much about mathematics and logic, however, but about having the psychological sense to judge whether your opponent is a sucker, a bluffer, a sharp or perhaps even a cheat.

The essence of poker, which is common to all varieties of the game, lies in the complex interplay between the intrinsic strength of a hand according to the predefined hierarchy of card combinations, i.e., a pair, two pairs, three-of-a-kind etc., and the representation of the hand through the betting action. The intrinsic hand-value and the betting action constitute two distinct spheres in the game. If a hand goes all the way to showdown, the hand is determined in the sphere of intrinsic hand-value. And if all but one player folds before showdown, the hand is determined in the sphere of betting.

At the heart of Marx’s analysis of capital is the distinction between use-value and exchange-value (Marx, 1867: 125-131). One of Marx’s great achievements is the demonstration that when the exchange of commodities becomes mediated by money, the determination of exchange-value may proceed semi-autonomously from the commodity’s use-value. A market evolves in which the prices of commodities are determined according to market immanent laws and not as reflections of the intrinsic use-value of the commodities.

Obviously, there is no use-value in a game of poker in the strictly Marxist analysis since no labor goes into the game. Still, the composition of poker seems to emulate mechanisms described by Marx as quintessential to capitalism. The relation between the two forms of value in poker, intrinsic value and value as represented through the betting, is comparable to the Marxist distinction between use-value and exchange-value. And just as the initial precondition for capitalism is the separation of use-value and exchange-value, it is precisely the interplay between the actual nature of the players’ hands and their hand representations in the betting that gives the game its unique quality.

If poker were played with open cards and hands were compared directly with each other, the game would transform into a mere game of pure chance. In fact, it would cease to be poker. The particular nature of the game emerges only when the comparison between hands is mediated by the monetary expressions of the betting action. We may thus conceive of the sphere of betting action as a kind of market in which the ‘price’ or the exchange-value of the hands is negotiated. To some extent, the betting will reflect the underlying intrinsic hand-value but the betting may also to some extent proceed detached from the intrinsic hand-values. We see this eminently expressed in bluffing. As poker is essentially structured around the possibility of representation and misrepresentation of intrinsic hand values, we can understand the game, even in its most simple forms, as a way of playing with the separation of use-value and exchange-value.

When Thomas Jefferson bought Louisiana from Napoleon in 1803, the road was opened for the westward expansion of the US. At the time when poker emerged, New Orleans was a terminus on the American frontier between the civilised East and the vast unexplored, unexploited natural resources of the Wild West. In Marxist terms, the Western territories constituted a reservoir of unappropriated use-value and the westward expansion was driven by a desire to capitalize this value. Use-value was thus realized.
by being incorporated into the existing cycles of capitalist exchange-value. Hardt and Negri have analyzed this expansionist phase of capitalism as a process whereby capital appropriates value by subsuming its non-capitalist environment formally under capital: ‘In the process of capitalization the outside is internalized’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 226).

Along these lines, we can understand the difference between exchange-value and use-value as a difference between inside and outside of the expanding capitalism. Being situated right on the frontier, New Orleans functioned as a major point of exchange between East and West, a kind of membrane mediating the relation between inside and outside. New Orleans was the epicentre of the great forces set free by the capitalization of the hitherto unappropriated use-value of the West. In so far as poker simulates the detachment, discrepancy and tension between use-value and exchange-value, its historical and geographical origin is perhaps no coincidence.

The civilization of poker and the taming of the Wild West

During the 19th century, poker saw a number of innovations and additions, which refined the game from the simple form of Flat poker into the more sophisticated form of Draw poker that is played even today.

Between 1830 and 1850, players began playing the game with a full deck of fifty-two cards (Schwartz, 2006: 249). This paved the way for the recognition of the flush (five cards of the same suit) and the straight (five cards in consecutive order) as legitimate combinations and by 1875, the full range of poker hands that we know today was complete (Parlett, 1991: 112-113). In the second half of the century, another two features were added to the game, which were to make the game of poker even more distinct from its European predecessors (Schwartz, 2006: 249). The introduction of the draw meant that players were given a second chance of improving their hand in that they were allowed to exchange any number of cards from their initial hand for an equivalent number of cards in a second round of dealing. The introduction of ‘jackpots’ prohibits players from opening the betting unless they hold a pair of jacks or better and mandating bets if they do hold jacks. If no player has a hand strong enough to open the betting, the initial compulsory bets at the beginning of a round (antes and blinds) are carried over into the next hand thus creating a ‘jackpot’.

The initial motives for these changes brought about by ‘sharpers’, i.e. professional card players, may have been to increase profitability by allowing more players in a game, stimulate betting action and enhance opportunities for cheating (Findlay, 1986: 48). The changes however are parts of a development that was, according to card historian David Parlett, ‘to turn Poker from a gamble to a science’ (Parlett, 1991: 112).

The move from 20 to 52 cards and the recognition of straights and flushes in combination with the draw introduces more strategic options in the game and it gives players with some notion of probability theory a greater edge in the game. The power struggle between ‘made hands’ (hands that need no improvement to win the pot, for instance three-of-a-kind) and ‘drawing hands’ (hands that are currently worthless but
become very strong if they improve on the draw, for instance four cards to a flush) that is a crucial element of poker today is also made possible by these innovations. Another important consequence of the introduction of the draw and the additional round of betting is that players are given more information to work with in order to deduce the content of an opponent’s hand. If for instance an opponent merely calls on the first round of betting, draws only one card a then bets aggressively on the second round of betting there are justified reasons to believe he is holding a straight or a flush. Similarly the introduction of jackpots not only contributes to limiting the most reckless bluffing, it also gives players the possibility of gaining valuable information about opponents’ possible holdings, provided players are able to process this information. In the fully developed form of Draw poker, capacity for logical deduction and a sense of probability theory supplement the ability to judge opponent’s character as means to gain an edge in the game.

We have seen in the above how poker in its basic form relies on the difference and detachment of the sphere of betting from the sphere of actual hand-values and how this difference may be conceived in terms of Marx’ distinction between exchange-value and use-value. With the refinements of the game and the development of Draw poker during the course of the 19th century, this difference is taken one step further.

As poker evolves and the strategic element comes to the fore at the expense of pure chance, the outcome of the game is to a higher degree determined by the players’ strategic decisions rather than the random distribution of cards. In other words, the game is determined by the players’ actions in the sphere of betting rather than the cards they are dealt in the sphere of hand-values. In so far as the sphere of betting is comparable to the negotiation of exchange-value in the market, we can say that the evolution of poker from a game of chance to a game of strategy is comparable to the development of market immanent mechanisms for the determination of exchange-value in capitalist society, which Marx describes. Winning in poker is a matter of the player mastering the ‘market mechanisms’ of the game and negotiating the ‘exchange-value’ of the hands in a way that redistributes the value at stake in the game at his benefit. Depending on his level of skill, the player will be to some degree able to compensate for an eventual lack of strong hands. Just as the capitalist in the analysis by Marx, the skilled Draw poker player is able to extract more value from the sphere of exchange than he puts into it. What we see in poker at this stage is a simulation of the laws of the market systematically redistributing value in a way not necessarily corresponding to the use-value being fed into the market.

The 19th century was an era of industrialization that transformed the US from an agricultural economy to the largest and most competitive industrial nation in the world. As the American Frontier moved westwards, more and more areas of the continent were subsumed by an industrial capitalist mode of production. And as civilisation and development progressed, the West became less and less Wild. The construction of the rail-road system is an illustrative example of this historical development. The first mechanised passenger trains were put into operation in the 1830s and a climax in the history of the American railroads was reached in 1869 when the first transcontinental railroad was completed.
Boltanski and Chiapello describe how the particular ‘spirit of capitalism’ at the end of the 19th century identifies economic progress with the achievements of the individual person as bourgeois entrepreneur: ‘The image of the entrepreneur, the captain of industry, the conquistador, encapsulates the heroic elements of the portrait, stressing gambles, speculation, risk, innovation’. But these heroic elements are at the same time combined with more novel economic propensities such as ‘avarice or parsimony, the spirit of saving, a tendency to rationalize daily life in all its aspects, development of capacities for book-keeping, calculation, prediction’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999: 17).

As this contradictory portrait of the bourgeois entrepreneur illustrates, the century marked a transformation from an expansionist phase of capitalism, as we have described in the above, to an industrial phase of capitalism. In the expansionist phase, the major source of value was the appropriation of hitherto unexploited natural resources. In the industrial phase, value is no longer so much appropriated from the external environment as it is produced within the system of capitalism itself. The industrial phase marks the completion of a process of capitalization whereby, in the above words of Hardt and Negri, the outside is internalized. The US was no longer a territory divided between an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ of capitalism but rather a total system in which the ‘outside’ had been ‘internalised’. The construction of the transcontinental railroad together with a wide range of other moments of ‘civilisation’, including the constitution of the US as a unified nation, contributed to the development of a more all-encompassing system of capitalism and a more predictable, regulated, calculable and efficient market for the exchange and distribution of value in society. In Draw poker, we find a simulation of these market mechanisms for exchange and distribution of value.

**Poker in the factory society**

The form of poker known at Stud poker was invented already in the second half of the 19th century (Parlett, 1991: 113). After the First World War, the popularity of Draw poker began to fade, while Stud poker, and Seven-card Stud in particular, took the place as the most popular form of poker in America (Lukacs, 1963: 59).

In Draw poker, players hold all their cards in their hand concealed from the other players. Stud differs from Draw in that the players’ hands consist of cards only the player can see (‘hole cards’) and cards visible to all players. The first and most primitive form of Stud poker is Five-card Stud. In this version, players are initially dealt one hole card and one card face up. Based on these two cards, the players complete the first interval of betting. Then remaining players are dealt an additional three cards face up to complete the full hand and there is a second betting interval ending in a showdown. At the turn of the 20th century, the more advanced form of Seven-card Stud became popular (Brown, 2006: 41). In this version, players are dealt an initial two hole cards face down and one up card after which a betting interval follows. Then remaining players are dealt a fourth, fifth and sixth card face up each followed by a betting interval and eventually a seventh card face down after which the last interval of betting follows
and ends in a showdown. At showdown, the player able to form the strongest five-card poker hand out of his seven cards takes the pot.

In Seven-card Stud, there are altogether five betting rounds compared to only two rounds in Draw and Five-card Stud. This brings the mathematical dimension of the game to the fore. At every betting interval, the skilled Seven-card Stud player is able to make precise calculations of his own and opponents’ probabilities of improving their hand. These calculations take into account not only the cards in the player’s own hand but also all the cards in opponents’ hands visible on the board. Since cards are taken off the board as players fold their hand it is crucial to take into account not only the cards currently visible but also the cards ‘mucked’ in earlier stages of the hand. In a game of five or six players, a substantial share of the cards often becomes visible at some time during the course of the hand allowing players with the capacity for attention, memory and probability theory to gain a substantial edge.

Five-card Stud only plays well with no-limit betting. Seven-card Stud however also plays well with a fixed limit on the betting at each round and it is often played in this form. The betting structure has deep implications on the game and a fixed limit game again puts even more emphasis on the mathematical side of poker as it becomes more difficult to bluff opponents out of a pot.

In Draw poker, all the information players have about an opponent’s hand is mediated through the opponent. This goes for the number of cards drawn, the betting action and possible physical tells. This means that all information is at the same time subject to possible deception. A player standing pat (not drawing any cards) may turn out to be bluffing on a worthless hand. A player passively checking instead of betting may be sandbagging (misrepresenting a strong hand) a flush. And a player showing despair when looking through his cards after the draw may have picked up the exact card to complete his straight.

In Stud, and in Seven-card Stud in particular, information that is more exact is available for the logical and statistical analysis of the game situation. We have already seen how the step from Flat poker to Draw poker made the game more scientific. This is even more the case with the step from Draw to Seven-card Stud. In Seven-card Stud, it is possible to infer with a high degree of certainty from the large amount of exact information to what is not immediately known (opponents’ hole cards and cards not yet dealt) thus reducing the element of chance and deception in the game (Yardley, 1957: 109-111). Hence, Seven-card Stud and fixed limit in particular is largely a contest of approximating mathematically optimal play.

In the period between 1870, when Draw was fully developed and the 1920s when Seven-card Stud became the most popular form of poker, not only the form of the game but also the venue of playing shifted. From being a game played by cardsharps, gold diggers and cowboys on the Mississippi river boats or in the saloons of the Western boomtowns, poker came to be more of a social and recreational game played between friends, colleagues or business associates in the drawing room or the office after hours (Lukacs, 1963: 59; Lubet, 2006: 3-5; Wilson, 2007: 76). Poker was no longer played at the frontier but rather at the centre of capitalist society.
The gradual development of industrial society, as described in the previous passage, enters a new phase at the time around the 1920s and 1930s. As the opportunities for the subsumption of new territories under the capitalist mode of production were exhausted, the focus of economic progress shifted towards the optimization of this very mode of production. We see this shift for instance in Taylor’s development of the principles of Scientific Management that were most illustratively implemented in the systems of mass production at the Ford factories. From a Marxist perspective, the simple rationale behind Taylorism and Fordism was to enhance the productivity of labor thus appropriating a larger amount of relative surplus-value by increasing the use-value (output) of the labor process without increasing the exchange-value (salary) proportionally (Aglietta, 1979: 116-122). In order for surplus-value to be transformed into profit however, it needs to be realised, i.e., it is not enough just to produce more goods, you need also to be able to sell the goods at the right price in order to make money. Hence, the further development of capitalist society along the lines of industrialism calls for not only an optimization of the process of production but also for a regulation and stimulation of the market where commodities are sold and consumed.

In the analysis of Hardt and Negri, the state comes to play a major role in the regulation and stimulation of the market. Thus, the New Deal of the 1930s signified the emergence of a new phase of capitalism characterized by a more totalizing system of regulation. ‘The New Deal constituted a real departure from the previous forms of the bourgeois regulation of economic development’ and it marked the development of the ‘trinity that would constitute the modern welfare state: a synthesis of Taylorism in the organization of labor, Fordism in the wage regime, and Keynesianism in the macroeconomic regulation of society’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 241-242). The precondition for economic development in industrial capitalism is predictability, calculability and stability and the Keynesian state provided the framework within which the accumulation of profit in Taylorist/Fordist companies could function according to these principles. This regulation of society expanded beyond the boundaries of the US nation state, among other factors, through the accords of the Bretton Woods agreement that fixed the exchange rates between different national currency systems on the US-dollar thus facilitating stable conditions for international trade.

Boltanski and Chiapello describe a distinct spirit of capitalism for the period between the 1930s and the 1960s that no longer identified the individual entrepreneur as the motor of economic development but rather put emphasis on the organization. In this spirit the heroic figure is the manager

preoccupied by the desire endlessly to expand the size of the firm he is responsible for, in order to develop mass production, based on economies of scale, product standardization, the rational organization of work, and new techniques for expanding markets (marketing). (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999: 18)

Rather than the adventurous and risky exploration of the unknown, the manager incarnates the refinement of a system of control, optimization and discipline within the standards of an already established order.

And discipline is precisely the crucial term in this phase of capitalism according to Hardt and Negri:
The New Deal produced the highest form of disciplinary government. ... [I]n a disciplinary society, the entire society, with all its productive and reproductive articulations, is subsumed under the command of capital and the state, and ... the society tends, gradually but with unstoppable continuity, to be ruled solely by criteria of capitalist production. A disciplinary society is thus a factory-society. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 242-243)

In Seven-card Stud, more than in other forms of poker, focus is on the individual hand in isolation. Since the element of bluffing is downplayed in favour of stringent deduction and calculation, it becomes less important to make out the psychological constitution of the opponent through a reading of his playing style over the course of several hands. Especially when played with fixed limits, the object of the game is not to build up to an outstanding situation in which the entire profit of the session is made by taking home one single major pot. Instead, the skilled player attempts to play each hand and each individual round of the hand as close to the mathematically optimal as possible thus gradually grinding out a profit in the long run as less skilled opponents deviate from the ‘ideal’ play.

The way profit is gradually grinded out in a game of fixed limit Seven-card Stud through the approximation to a mathematically and logically defined ideal of optimal play simulates the way surplus-value is gradually extorted from the disciplined process of production and consumption in advanced industrial capitalism. In similar fashion as the Fordist organization of the factory and the Keynesian regulation of the macro economy provide transparency and predictability in the production and marketing of commodities in industrial capitalism, the great amount of information and the fixed limit betting structure provide transparency and predictability in Seven-card Stud poker.

From Stud to Hold’Em

Limit poker is a science, but no-limit is an art. In limit, you are shooting at a target. In no-limit, the target comes alive and shoots back at you. (Crandall Addington, poker player, quoted in Alvarez, 1983: 198)

The most popular form of poker today is No-Limit Texas Hold’Em. Like many other things in the history of poker, the origins of Hold’Em are somewhat hazy. This particular variant of the game is thought to have emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in an area around Dallas (Schwartz, 2006: 413-414; Wilson, 2007: 119-122). From here, the game spread throughout southern USA after the Second World War. In the late 1960s, the game was introduced in Las Vegas by a group of Texas gamblers. When the World Series of Poker was founded at the Binion’s Horseshoe Casino in 1970, No-limit Texas Hold’Em was adopted for the main event. Since then, the popularity of Texas Hold’Em has been growing steadily. In the early 1980s, the game was introduced in Europe (McCloskey, 2005).

In the years just after 2000, a virtual poker boom was brought about by two technological innovations: Internet poker and televised poker tournaments (Schwartz, 2006: 493-494). The excitement of watching superstar poker players gamble for millions combined with the easy accessibility of internet gambling created an explosive boost in the popularity of poker in general and of No-limit Texas Hold’Em in particular with annual turnovers being counted in billions of dollars. Internet poker rooms do offer
a variety of poker games but by far the most heavily promoted form of poker is No-Limit Texas Hold'Em and even though the World Series of Poker hosts championships in a wide range of games, the No-Limit Texas Hold'Em game is still the undisputed main event. Henceforth, Texas Hold’Em has long since outgrown Stud as the most popular form of poker in the US as well as the rest of the world (Clark, 2006).

What are the main structural differences between Texas Hold’Em and Seven-card Stud? In Hold’Em, face-up cards are dealt as community cards and not as individual cards as they are in Stud. In Hold’Em, each player is dealt two hole-cards face down and then five community cards on four consecutive betting rounds. Furthermore, Stud normally plays with a limited betting structure whereas Hold’Em plays either with fixed limit or with no-limit betting. The most popular and widespread form of Hold’Em, however, is no-limit and this is the form on which we are going to focus in the following.

The most obvious consequence of up-cards being dealt as community cards in Hold’Em is that the amount of exact information available to players is generally greater in Stud than in Hold’Em. In a seven-handed game of Seven-card Stud, seven cards are visible on the board even before the first round of betting begins. Furthermore, depending on the number of players staying in the pot the number of up-cards may increase quickly. In Hold’Em, players get to see a maximum of only five cards plus their own hole cards. This means that in Stud, a player will have more exact knowledge about which cards he can expect to be dealt on future streets and which cards opponents may have since he can eliminate a significant amount cards that have already been dealt. Taken separately, this aspect emphasises the mathematical and logical element in Stud, lending edge to players that have the skills to survey the board and remember which cards have been discarded and which cards are still ‘live’. In Hold’Em, this kind of reasoning by sheer elimination is far simpler since players have only to be aware of the few cards currently on the board.

Yet, the most crucial difference between Stud and Hold’Em follows from the difference between fixed limit and no-limit betting. The difference between limit and no-limit is not only quantitative with bigger pots being played in no-limit than in limit given equal blind sizes. In a fixed-limit game, the betting and the development of a pot proceed in a more or less linear fashion. This means that even in the early stages of a hand, the potential costs of staying in the pot through to showdown and the potential win at showdown may be prognosticated with a certain degree of certainty. In a no-limit game, these kinds of calculations are upset by the ever-present possibility of somebody, either the opponent or the player himself, going all-in with his entire stack of chips. Hence, the development of a pot becomes less predictable, more fluctuating and more dependent on the opponent’s individual style, temper, character and most importantly his perception of the game.

Generally, it is more difficult to point to the ‘correct’ way of playing a hand in no-limit than in limit. In no-limit, the range of ‘correct’ plays will generally be much wider than in limit and it will depend on a more complex set of factors. The betting structure invites the player to take greater chances and go for draws less likely to succeed, since the prospect of going all-in with a completed hand may justify the amount invested in calling a bet to get more cards on the turn and river.
Summarizing these characteristics, Hold’Em can be understood as a hybrid of Stud and Draw, preserving the element of mathematical and logical calculation from Stud, but reviving the element of bluffing, deception and psychological reading from Draw. This superior complexity of Hold’Em is poignantly captured by poker legend Johnny Moss: ‘Hold’Em is to Stud and Draw what chess is to checkers’ (Moss in Alvare, 1983: 28).

In the words of another poker legend, Doyle Brunson, the same point is expressed in his characteristic of Texas Hold’Em: ‘Hold’em has more variety to it than any other form of Poker. And more complexity. It has something for everybody...the mathematicians and psychologists ...the “loose-gooses” and the “hard-rocks”’. Brunson also refers to No-limit Texas Hold’em as ‘the Cadillac of poker games’ (Brunson, 1978, p. 331; 419).

No-limit capitalism

We have now reached the final stage of our historical survey of the co-evolution of poker and capitalism. The analysis has of course been building up to the argument, that the shift from Stud to No-limit Texas Hold’Em is in fact the simulation of a comparable paradigm shift in capitalism from industrialism to the kind of capitalism characterising contemporary society.

The 1970s, when No-limit Texas Hold’Em started gaining popularity, was in a number of ways a time of great change in the development of capitalism. It was a time marked by crisis and rupture (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 261). Indeed, the phenomenon of crisis was nothing new in the history of capitalism. What seemed to happen at the time, however, was that instead of crisis marking the transition into a distinctly new phase of capitalism, crisis became in itself the new modus vivendi of capitalism. This is true for capitalism from the 1970s and onwards to the present. Symptomatically, the paradigm shift in capitalism happening around the 1970s is often conceptualized not by coining new phrases but rather by adding the prefix ‘post-’ to already existing ‘-isms’. Prominent examples are post-industrialism (Bell, 1973), post-Fordism (Aglietta, 1979) and the more general term postmodernism (Lyotard, 1979).

The breakdown of the Bretton Woods system in 1972, which had hitherto served to stabilise the global network of currencies, is a key event in the transformation from industrial to post-industrial capitalism. The event marks the loss of a universal standard of value. The value of goods and services may of course still be measured against a monetary price in the market but the medium of this measurement, money, is no longer a fixed structure. As currencies begin to float freely, the money form itself becomes subject to the fluctuations of the market. Money is no longer just form but also at the same time content of the market.

The most marked symptom of the changing form of money in the transition from industrial to post-industrial capitalism is perhaps the emergence and explosive growth in the market for so-called financial derivatives such as futures, options, swaps, etc. (LiPuma and Lee, 2002). Derivatives are financial products that do not represent ownership of an underlying asset but constitute only the right to buy or sell assets at a specified price at some specified time in the future. It is indeed a disputed issue whether they are tools for hedging or tools for reckless speculation. In practice they are used for
both purposes (LiPuma and Lee, 2004; Bryan and Rafferty, 2006). From being virtually non-existing in the early 1970s, the market for financial derivatives trading has grown dramatically to a staggering 684 trillion dollars in outstanding amounts by 2008 (BIS, 2008). The emergence of derivatives markets are not only an addition to existing financial markets. Instead, they signify a fundamental change in the structuring of capitalism. This has also been referred to as a ‘financialization’ of the world economy: ‘[F]inancialization means the increasing role of financial motives, financial markets, financial actors and financial institutions in the operation of the domestic and international economies’ (Epstein, 2005). Financialization constitutes yet another stage in the gradual decoupling of the sphere of circulation (exchange) from the sphere of production that Marx pointed out even in the industrial form of capitalism.

As we have seen in the previous section, the way to play a hand in No-limit Texas Hold’Em is less straightforwardly determined by the actual content of the hand compared to the way hands are played in Stud. In Hold’Em position and the profiles of opponents are more important and the Hold’Em player has a wider arsenal of moves at his disposal in order to drive opponents out of a pot before showdown. In this respect, the move from Stud to Hold’Em signifies a kind of ‘decoupling’ of the betting action from the actual card holdings. Brunson states how: ‘In Limit Poker, you must show down the best hand most of the time to win. In No-Limit, on the other hand, you more often than not take a pot without ever showing your hand’ (Brunson, 1978: 29). This means that we find in Hold’Em a system for the distribution of value, which is less determined by ‘real events’, i.e. the actual deal of the cards, and more determined by the reading, creation and manipulation of expectations and imaginations among the players, i.e. by the betting action. In ideal typical terms, we can state the following difference between Stud and Hold’Em: In Stud, betting should by and large be a representation of the value of the hand and the successful player is he who is able to recognise with the greatest degree of accuracy the ‘true’ value of his hand and bet accordingly. In Hold’Em, on the contrary, betting is rather a simulation of the value of the hand, so the betting action constitutes a virtual reality, capable of determining the outcome of the hand semi-autonomously from the actual card holdings.

This difference between ‘representation’ and ‘simulation’ corresponds to the difference between industrial capitalism, where financial markets function as representations of value within the sphere of the productive economy, and post-industrial financial capitalism, where financial markets rather than the actual course of events outside of the financial markets tend to be the primary force determining the economic cycles.

An inherent feature of financial capitalism is the frequent recurrence of financial crises, which function to disrupt the entire economy. Over the last three decades we may recall the Black Monday in 1987, the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997-8, and of course the current financial crisis of 2007 and onwards. Trading in financial markets is built around expectations of the future and these expectations are shaped and managed through ever more sophisticated financial models. However, financial crises are characterized by the occurrence of events not foreseen by financial modeling or at least calculated as too unlikely to be considered probable. Such events have been referred to as ‘black swans’ (Taleb, 2007). It seems as if markets oscillate between behaving in a
rational and efficient manner and then suddenly behaving in ways defying all statistical logic as presumed by financial models.

The shift from fixed-limit Stud poker to no-limit Hold’Em involves a comparable shift of the basic rhythm of the game. The no-limit betting structure means that a game is often determined in a few great pots rather than the accumulated wins and losses of a long series of smaller pots. A game of no-limit Hold’Em is characterized by the recurrence of game situations where logic and mathematics fall short. The unlimited betting structure gives players the option of challenging an opponent for a larger part or even all of his money thus accentuating the role of bluffing in no-limit poker. Brunson states:

In Limit play, you must play solid hands because it’s almost impossible to run anybody out of a pot. But, in No-Limit play, you can make your opponent(s) lay down a hand by using your position and your money. (Brunson, 1978: 333)

Does not this remark summarize pretty well the way that the United States and most of Western Europe has managed to prosper and grow financially over the last three to four decades despite dismantling, during the same period, large parts of the actually productive sectors of our economies?

Play and the subtraction of ideology

The aim of this article is to pick up on the program for a sociology of games set out by Callois and to demonstrate how the history of poker simulates more general tendencies in the economic structuring of society. The way poker simulates the circulation of value in contemporary capitalism is, however, not a mere representation or modelling of capitalism. First, poker is an exaggeration of capitalism. The game simulates characteristic features of capitalism and reproduces these in an accelerated and sublimated form. Second, poker presents these features in a very naked and immediate form. In our ordinary perception of the economic structures of society, these structures inevitably appear in the light of ideological and normative ideas about capitalism. Capitalism is not only a set of structures for the circulation of value but also an ideological superstructure justifying these structures. And the system’s tenacity of life comes from the inability to always keep the two separated.

However, poker seems to have the capacity precisely for separating the two. It gives us the structure without the ideology. Poker does not compel anyone to believe in the game. It carries no justification for itself. It is a set of rules to which we may choose to submit ourselves – or not. This is perhaps the source of the feeling of freedom that comes with playing games as opposed to just engaging in ordinary activities in capitalist society. ‘The game’s sole principle’, so Baudrillard,

is that by choosing the rule one is delivered from the law. Without a psychological or metaphysical foundation, the rule has no grounding in belief. One neither believes nor disbelieves a rule – one observes is. The diffuse sphere of belief, the need for credibility that encompasses the real, is dissolved in the game. (Baudrillard, 1979, p. 133)
Through the experience of the freedom of playing, we may come to realise or at least be temporarily delivered from the ideological constraints of society.

Now, what are the implications of the analogy between poker and capitalism proposed by the analysis of this article? When asking this question we seem to confront, immediately, the aforementioned ambivalent nature of the meaning of games found in the thinking of Huizinga and Callois. This ambivalence carries over into the thinking of Baudrillard, who says: ‘Given that the rule is conventional and arbitrary, and has no hidden truth. ... It does not carry any meaning, it does not lead anywhere’ (Baudrillard 1979: 132).

This ambivalence applies also in the case of poker. While there is an obvious relation between the structure of Draw, Stud, and Hold’Em on the one hand and the paradigms of frontier, factory and financial capitalism on the other, it is much less obvious what is the analytical or normative content of the relation. It seems impossible to decide, unequivocally, whether poker is a perversion of capitalism or whether the game is actually a perfection of capitalism. And it seems also impossible to decide whether the game is a form of critique or perhaps rather a celebration of capitalism. With the risk of thereby rendering the ambition of the study into merely an analytical game, it seems most appropriate to retain the hesitation and modesty of Callois by concluding that it is not absurd to try diagnosing capitalist societies in terms of the form of poker that is especially popular there.

references


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Work = work ≠ work: In defence of play

Sophie-Thérèse Krempl and Timon Beyes

Our paper adopts a paradoxical mode of analysis in order to reconstruct the inherently paradoxical constitution and conceptualisation of work as function and/or meaning in itself. The effects of this dichotomisation of work also underlie the current debate on so-called social and artistic critiques of capitalism, to echo Boltanski and Chiapello’s distinction in The New Spirit of Capitalism, and the diagnosis of how artistic practices and claims are subsumed under the logic of capitalist organization. It is here that we situate the thesis of play’s incorporation into capitalist development. Unfolding an understanding of work that acknowledges and keeps open the play of paradoxes that produces ‘work’, we problematize the diagnosis of the unavoidable incorporation of play. The insolubility of paradox and the paradoxical constitution of work reopen rather than foreclose the question of play and thus the possibilities and capacities of artistic critique.

From my close contact with artists and chess players I have come to the personal conclusion that while not all artists are chess players, all chess players are artists. (Marcel Duchamp, handwritten note, reprinted in Fuchs and Strouhal, 2010: 144)

Introduction

In contemporary organizational life, it seems that play can no longer be seen as an other to work. As Höpfl succinctly sums it up in a blurb on the back cover of The Management of Everyday Life (Hancock and Tyler, 2009), ‘[f]or the past thirty years the distinction between work and non-work has been blurring and has now all but dissolved’. According to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 155), a focus on activity tends to replace the conventional work ethic, making ‘personal or even leisure activity’ indistinguishable from ‘professional activity’. What appears to disappear, then, is the boundary between work and play: ‘[D]ue to radical changes in organizational conditions’ (...) play has exploded (...) in private, public and voluntary organizations’ (Andersen, 2009: 9). From a critical perspective, it seems there is nothing to celebrate here. If play is swallowed up by current mechanisms and modalities of workplace control, if ‘the ‘unreality of games’ is fully incorporated within the reality of organizations’, then ‘play no longer holds the promise of life after capitalism’, as the editorial for this special issue mournfully proclaims (329).

As Fleming (2005: 288) has indicated with regard to ‘fun programmes’ in organizations, however, enlisting humour for ‘sober corporate motives’ appears
paradoxical. Apart from the fact that non-playful forms of primitive accumulation are terribly alive and kicking (De Angelis, 2007; Retort, 2005), postulating the collapse of play into work provokes the necessity to look into the notions of both work and play and the paradox that seems to be at issue here. For ‘[m]inimally defined, play is an activity that has no end other than itself, that does not intend to gain any effective power over things or persons’; the freedom of play is thus opposed to the servitude of work (Rancière, 2009b: 31). If this is so, then how can work become play (and cease to be work) or play become work (and cease to be play)? On the basis of these questions, the aim of our paper is to complexify the critical analysis of contemporary work relations through developing a paradoxical notion of work.

This approach requires us to take a step back and engage with philosophical concepts of work, mainly Hegelian and Marxian, which are inherently paradoxical. Working implies a contradictory relation of causality. In Hegelese: The moment a working subject experiences its powers of self-assertion and freedom, it is confronted with its dependency and limits. In Marxian parlance, the emancipatory character of work already entails the foundation of its estrangement. In the history of thought, the paradoxical dichotomisation of work as function and as meaning in itself (and the attempts to ‘hide’ the paradox by prioritising one side over the other) can be traced up to the current debate on so-called social and artistic critiques of capitalism, to echo Boltanski and Chiapello’s influential distinction in The New Spirit of Capitalism (2005). It is here that we situate the diagnosis of play’s corruption into capitalist development.

Play’s ‘dysfunctionality’ or ‘inoperability’ has been conceived as paradigmatic for artistic practice, the potential of the aesthetic and political emancipation (Marcuse, 1980; Schiller, 2004; Rancière, 2009b; Strouhal, 2010). The fiction – the as if – of play is disinterested in the profane reality of everyday life, enabling its transgression (Pfaller, 2010). But if playful activity merges with professional activity, then the potential of artistic critique becomes a function of work and new forms of exploitation (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Is ‘aesthetic play’ therefore easily subsumed under the logic of late capitalism? Through the paradoxical lens, we engage with and challenge this critique of artistic critique as a forceful, albeit melancholic, line of argument. Boltanski and Chiapello’s claim hinges on and perpetuates the assumption of a non-contradictory constitution of work, whereby playful activity is translated into an instrumental postulate of work as meaning in itself. Offering a more complex notion of work, we contend that the insolubility of paradox and the paradoxical constitution of work reopen rather than foreclose the question of play and thus the possibilities and capacities of artistic critique (Beyes and Steyaert, 2011).

We proceed as follows. First, we briefly outline what we call a paradoxical mode of analysis. Second, we discuss important philosophical conceptions of work – as developed by Aristotle, Hegel and Marx – to demonstrate how notions of work are inherently paradoxical. Third, we look at Boltanski and Chiapello’s distinction between social critique and artistic critique as a pre-eminent frame for claiming that play has become part of capitalist labour relations. However, this distinction reproduces the dichotomisation of work and the ‘hiding’ of its paradoxical constitution. In what is less a conclusion than an opening, we finally offer an aesthetico-political perspective that
 work

acknowledges the play of paradoxes that produces ‘work’ – and that keeps open the possibilities of play.

Thinking paradoxically

To claim that work’s paradoxical constitution reopens rather than forecloses the question of play and thus the possibilities of artistic critique requires a look at the concept of paradox. It offers a non-dichotomist perspective on the phenomenon of work, its conditions and contradictions. Such a non-dichotomist perspective, we argue, resists collapsing play into work (or work into play) because it allows to think of work as being in irresolvable tension between both fulfilment of a function and meaning in itself.

According to Kant (1977), paradox can be defined as a tautological assertion. It consists of claiming that something is identical with something else. However, this holds only at first glance; from a causal-logical perspective, the effect is not identical with the cause. The paradox – and in a sense every tautology that is not meaningless – contains a differentiation and allows its components to be related to each other in a causal relation.

To clarify the tautological paradox, consider the example of Epimenides who as a Cretan said that all Cretans are liars. That which is to be verified, i.e. that all Cretans lie, is put into doubt as the statement comes from the mouth of a Cretan. The structure ‘works’ through its undecidability; therefore, a circular paradoxical reasoning is at hand. While one can surmise that the Cretans eventually avail of a claim to truth, this seems to be equivalent to its opposite. In formulaic terms: lie = lie ≠ lie. The equal sign of the tautology of cause and effect identifies something that contradicts itself both structurally as well as functionally. The equal sign can therefore be translated with ‘is confused with’ (Spencer-Brown, 1969).

Such a paradoxical equalization of difference allows for an explanation of the paradox: The factor on the one side of the equal sign must be understood as being the predicate of the factor on the other side, and the equal sign marks a difference that annuls the equality (Kant, 1977). The equal sign brings forth the distinction; it is the connecting element and the expression of the changed reference at the same time. It is – paradox: The equal sign, as it sets an equality, is constitutive of the differentiation of its elements and suggests an identity that can only be thought in the form of difference. Each equalization is based on a distinction and every explanation has a tautology at its start since we can only justify and give reason for that which we can explain (Bateson, 1979).

According to Hegel (1988: 182), this form of explanation can be defined as the ‘Unterscheiden des Ununterschiedenen’ (‘distinguishing that which contains no difference’) that allows for the (re)inscription of a difference. An explanation consists of inscribing a difference within a phenomena that is regarded as being an identity. This, then, is what thinking paradoxically means: In every assumed identity and in each equalization there is a difference that can become analytically productive. On these grounds, we will argue that work is conceptually – and independently of capitalist
appropriation – structured in a paradoxical manner. Moreover, if the contradictions inherent in notions of work are not understood as antitheses (work as either function or meaning in itself) but as constituting a paradox (both/and), then play cannot be fully subsumed into work.

Finally, thinking paradoxically has consequences for the self-image and the role of the researcher that we can only hint at here. Identifying paradoxes without being able to solve them – or even wish to solve them – is not viewed with much favour in both social theory (Luhmann, 2005) and organization studies (Czarniawska, 2001). ‘People refusing to [resolve paradoxes] may do it under one of two special licenses’, writes Czarniawska (2001: 13): ‘either they are mad, or else they are artists’. That said, we believe that developing a paradoxical notion of work will enable a more careful and nuanced analysis of the transformation of work relations and the assumed concurrence of play and work. As Jones and ten Bos (2007) have argued, philosophical thinking has much more to do with acknowledging aporias, paradoxes and undecidability than with seeking certainty and ‘policing’ organization theory. In our case, this implies a rejection of sweeping statements on the state of work within late capitalism or the incorporation of play and artistic strategies. Moreover, it also calls for the awareness that one’s own work on work is invariably intertwined in the paradoxical constitution of work.

The paradox of work

Even a brief overview of the history of the concept of work, which we sketch in the following by way of Aristotle, Hegel and Marx, leads to the uncovering of elementary paradoxes in work (Krempl, 2011). Work can be understood as a contradictory relationship of meaning and function from the moment it stopped being postulated a forced necessity and came to be seen as a potentially satisfying mode of fulfilment. A definition of work that does not go beyond the insistence on its instrumentally rational character has since then been afflicted with conceptual difficulties. For work can also denote meaning-making: It does not only wear itself out in a material, physical and commensurable satisfaction of needs; the activity itself has gained an additional value. Consider a worker who takes care of his or her family economically and, knowing this, finds some kind of fulfilment through and due to their work. The typical gainful employment does not necessarily exhaust itself exclusively in its narrow instrumental character. Or consider the image of the artist as enacting a kind of ‘self-realization’ through his or her work, overcoming ‘mere’ necessity and thus expressing a form of freedom. A conceptual tension emerges: Precisely because an instrumental rationale applies, the experience of meaning is enabled; as the labour of art keeps a function-related productive character, it can display free and autotelic traits. Both examples of work, loaded with aspects of meaning, mark two dichotomic points of a change in the definition of work. The historical development towards work as meaning provokes a hermeneutic problem of work: it attains a decisive worth which neither exhausts itself in the mere fulfilment of duties nor creates conditions worth living in after the job has been done.
The dichotomy of function and meaning of work

The emergence of a dichotomic, contradictory definition of work can be traced back to the Aristotelian differentiation of praxis, denoting self-referential conduct, and poiesis, denoting a function-oriented, productive action. This understanding of work is based on the separation of leisure, the scholè, and ‘non-leisureness’ or ‘un-leisure’, the ascholia (sc. Aristotle, 1995: 1133b, 1). All that we do is judged by the enabling relationship that work has to other, self-referential, self-worth actions. From this we can develop the distinction between necessary, function-related and self-worth actions and, correspondingly, the classification of work: work is valuable if it can serve the function of an intrinsic self-value (sc. Aristotle, 1998: 1177b, 5-6); it only has meaning if it is aligned and in tune with the possibility of allowing free actions. The teleological opposition places itself between the production paradigm of necessary, function-related actions (poiesis), within which one can subsume work, and the paradigm of freely chosen, meaningful activities (praxis). The latter realm is not analogous to but is conceptually related to leisure, which is seen as the basic stipulation for the meaning of life (Dummer, 2001: 73). Apparently, however, the Greeks of Athenian democracy did not engage with tensions emerging from this dichotomy, since each activity is allocated to a given sphere in the polis and a commingling of actions is prevented through rigid social layers (Snell, 1975).

Nevertheless, there is a structural similarity to current discussions on the organization and worth of work: function orientation and meaning creation, the purpose and significance of activities are the poles of the conception and evaluation of work in the Greek classical period as they are today. However, only since work has become a significant component of the Christian moral code and thus a moral self-calling can one identify its contradictory as well as paradoxical elements. Luther, with his invention of the Beruf (occupation), declared work to be valid as a moral duty (Luther, 1996: 23).

This way, a turn has been taken in the conception of work: It has transformed into a self-calling, and it will be Max Weber who will bring the Protestant ethic to the definition of its transcendental rationale (Weber, 2004). It is not any longer (only) a simple fulfilment of duties, a means of receiving reward, a chance to step up the social ladder, contractually regulated occupational work or brute force. Work is now also endowed with an intrinsic value, which will not disappear with European secularization and the profanation of life and society. In a nutshell, in modern times the conceptual and social inconsistencies of work are no longer exempted through conceptual and social separation and placed outside of praxeological significance. Hereinafter, its contradictions are immanently internalized and work is therefore given a practical identity formation character: it becomes the socializing and meaning-generating activity.

The paradox of function and meaning of work: Marx and Hegel

The contradiction of function and meaning of and within work asserts itself perhaps most strikingly in Hegel’s anthropology and phenomenology of work and in the Marxist teachings on the value of work as a dialectic structural feature of modern social development (Marx, 1962). As we will show, Marx relates to Hegel’s ambivalent
concept of work in order to stress, on the one hand, the freedom-related and, on the other hand, the forced character of work and to formulate his critique of political economy on this basis. Work, for Marx, is the deficit-related form of human praxis until it has overcome its alienated character (Marx, 2005). In principle, this opens up the option of a non-alienated praxis that just as in philosophy – in the sense of the Feuerbach theses – is practically applicable and not only just ‘scholastic’ (Marx, 1978: 5); however, only if work, like philosophy, has a revolutionary function. Only this praxis has socially constitutive power, as the overcoming of the contradiction is its incessant condition: The state of alienated work must be overcome. Suffice it to say that, first, if the natural hold of work is its eternal characteristic, then it is questionable if the danger of alienation can ever be averted; and second, that the transition from alienated to non-alienated labour has to be achieved through a non-alienated praxis (Arndt and Lefèvre, 1983: 24) – which, for the time being, reiterates the contradictory constitution of work.

It seems reasonable, then, to view this conflicting relationship – especially under the perspective of today’s work relations – in another manner. That does not mean that one has to deny the Marxist difference between alienated and non-alienated labour. It also does not mean repudiating the difference between the use-value and exchange-value of work. Rather, it means that this dichotomy should be understood as inherently paradoxical. For it is this view that allows us to understand Marx’s insistence on the contradiction between the use-value and exchange-value of work. The latter comes about through, on the one hand, the monetary valuation and, on the other hand, the ability of money to produce an added value without needing a use-value. If meaning-creation becomes a telos of work, then it does not only produce an exploitable monetary added value, but also brings forth another added value: meaning. Furthermore, the use-value of work can always be used in a manner other than for direct usage or consumption; therefore it has the possibility to be misused for other purposes as well. The exchange value of work, that which gives my product an equivalent, but externally applied value, is – within a strictly materialistic understanding – the only ‘legitimate’ form of corruption of the use-value of work. Capital is the decisive economic factor that corrupts work as it relativizes the value equivalency relation. But the corruptibility or the misuse of the use-value of work lies within the ‘essence’ of work itself, as its value attribution is not fixed but variable. The use-value is at the mercy of both ‘right’ as well as ‘wrong’ uses from the very start and one can only hope that one does not lose everything in the ‘market of equivalencies’:

This is not simply a bad thing, even if the use-value is always at risk of losing its soul in the commodity. The commodity is a born ‘cynic’ because it effaces differences, but although it is congenitally leveling (…) this original cynicism was already being prepared in use-value (…).

(Derrida, 1994: 162, orig. emphasis)

There is thus an indivisibility of economy and subject constitution in dealing with the contradiction of work. The contradiction cannot be simply chopped up into its individual parts and the tension in which the subject is situated cannot simply be removed. Marx makes work’s double relation and the corresponding alienation into a criterion of illegitimacy and finds the reason for the necessary overcoming of the paradox therein. But when we consider how this ambivalence comes about, a field opens up in which alienation cannot be overcome; instead, it has to be grasped as the
necessarily ambivalent prerequisite for the development of organized exchange. It is but a small step between the dichotomic and the paradox view on the contradiction of work: The paradox perception of contradiction sees alienation as a necessary component of work and also as a necessary component of the production of meaning. It is here, faced with a paradoxical notion of work, that we turn (back) to Hegel.

Work is for Hegel (1988; see also Hegel, 1975, 1976) both a technical instrument and a social medium. It is the activity that is constitutive of the reflexive creation of a subject’s self-understanding and the means by which a subject is able to follow a purpose. The possibility of experiencing oneself as an active being therefore depends upon establishing a fundamental relation of reference. This relation is what Hegel defines as work. Work, here, is the result of a purpose-setting. Thereby the working person reaches a result; he or she personally experiences their active role and their self as a reflexive, relational being. Work, for Hegel, is a means of changing one’s condition and one’s self-image. It is exactly here that we find the emancipatory character of work that Marx discusses in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, which he however only deals with as a contradiction that has to be overcome (Marx, 2005). Work is therefore mainly formed and shaped by its dual character: the moment a working subject experiences its powers of self-assertion and freedom, it is confronted with its dependency and limits. If one goes along with this version of things, it is not the capitalist organization of work that produces this paradox; it lies within the nature of work itself.

The paradoxical structure of work

The paradox shows itself in a tautological movement: Work consists of completing tasks for the function of producing goods and services, thereby being constantly forced into repetition. It implies performing activities in order to produce outcomes whilst simultaneously forcing the working subject into constant reiteration. As a German proverb has it: Arbeit macht Arbeit (‘work effects work’). The means of coping with or doing away with something produces (more of) that which has been coped with or done away with. That which should be accomplished brings forth that which must be undertaken in order to accomplish it. To put it formulaically: work = work (cf. Baecker 2001; 2002).

However, this is a conflicting relationship: Cause and effect are equalled on a circular basis in that, within the individual work process, the effect of the activity in turn creates its prerequisite. Whereas the sequence of handling work is on the one hand infinite, it is at the same time dependent on termination. This turns the tautology into a paradox. Work is not just based on a purely circular self-reference: Within the work process, changes take place. The factors involved with work, its social embedding and the workers themselves are subject to permanent spatial and time-related change processes, so that the formula ‘work = work’ is just as valid as ‘work ≠ work’. Work is structurally paradoxical. In order to be work, therefore, it has to be able to differentiate itself from itself. Work on the one side of the equal sign means something which it does not mean on the other side. Work on the one side means production, finalization – on the other side it means repetition, infinity; on the one side an activity, on the other side a product; on the one side the passive connotation of toil, coercion, necessity and fulfilling a
function, on the other side its identical-not-identical opposition of self-fulfilment, liberation and meaning in itself.

Not only is ‘work = work’ valid, then, but also ‘work ≠ work’. Within this discrepancy we can find the roots of the Marxist teachings on the value of work: work is not identical with its value. Work is work through work, but thereby one work is not and does not remain the other. That means, first, that work is conditioned on its productivity; second, that the productivity in return is conditioned on the preliminary nature of its worth and is thereby dependent upon its productive repetition. Therefore the paradox can be summed up as: ‘work = work ≠ work = work’ ad infinitum. Work is identical to work but only as long as it is not done. Work is a dichotomic paradox that iterates itself paradoxically.

The corruption of play? Social critique, artistic critique and the paradox of work

On the basis of our brief tour through philosophical conceptions of work and its paradoxical constitution, we now turn to contemporary critical positions that inform the diagnosis of play’s incorporation into late capitalist work relations. It is not our intent to retrace the manifold and multifaceted debates on the present and the future of work here; suffice it to say that both societal changes and the paradoxical structure of work will surely provoke more ‘work on work’ (‘Arbeit an der Arbeit’ [Priddat, 2000]).

Specifically, we engage with Boltanski and Chiapello’s influential analysis in The New Spirit of Capitalism. This book offers a compelling argument about how artistic practices and claims have been ‘devoured’ by late capitalism. As will become apparent, this contemporary form of the inherently paradoxical dichotomisation of work – alongside many others – stays rather close to Marxian (and thereby Hegelian) parlance and thinking. After discussing what Boltanski and Chiapello call the social and artistic critiques, we question whether this sociological distinction is able to do justice to the paradoxical constitution of work. Moreover, if work infinitely and paradoxically effects work (‘work = work ≠ work’), it is structurally unable to fully integrate play into its logic.

The social critique and its contradictions

Many analyses of the development of work are grounded in the awareness of its alienated character. These studies – that according to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) belong to or form a perspective of social critique – engage with the transformation of work, its conditions and its organization. What becomes apparent here is a certain consensus, a linearity of argument in the tradition of the ‘one-dimensional man’ (Marcuse, 1964) and the ‘corrosion of character’ (Sennett, 1998) in the era of the ‘consumer society’ (e.g. Arendt, 1958). The social critique follows the dichotomic constitution of work and implicitly corresponds to the paradox outlined above: Work is supposed to resolve that which it simultaneously causes. This position is based on the contradictory entanglement of work in the dilemma of its own (postulated) value and
instrumental functionality. In Marxian terms: It is based on the contradiction between exchange-value and use-value of work.

Under these circumstances, the social identity of the individual, which is based on work, becomes contingent as it is determined by economic criteria, which only allow for a decision-making between the poles of production and consumption (Laclau, 1990; du Gay, 1996). The resulting economic upheavals and the becoming-precarious of employees (Schultheis and Schulz, 2005) correspond to a transformation of organizational structures; consider the frequently invoked switch from long-term occupations to short-term projects and to an ‘entrepreneurial labourer’ (Voß and Pongratz, 1998). As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) point out, these changes bear witness to and are part of the growing importance of individualization. Here we can once again detect work’s immanent contradiction: What it can potentially bring forth turns into its prerequisite. With the individualization of work on one side of the form arise new dependencies on the other side, namely excessive demands made of workers’ flexibility.

The social critique raises objections against the development of an individualistic paradigm of meaning and the corresponding potential of meaning-creation through work as far as this is accompanied by the loss of solidary, collective practices of organizing labour. The contradiction that results from the implementation of self-responsibility within the individual, argue Boltanski and Chiapello in their analyses of management literature published in the 1990s, is justified and given moral legitimacy by the argument of new possibilities for social integration via new forms of labour organization, which produce ‘a new system of value (…) on which people can rely to make judgements’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 105). Work thus functions as a generator of synthesis of function and meaning, object and subject of work. In this sense, we are dealing with a new form of ‘objectivation’ of work, the consequences of which not only extend to new labour-political conflicts but also to the questioning of the understanding of ‘subjectivity’ that is prevalent in modern societies (Böhle, 2003: 116).

For the definition of work, then, a new dilemma arises: If the adjustment of one’s abilities to market-driven requirements goes along with the continuous adjustment of one’s self-image, then the difference between work and non-work might indeed become porous. Weber’s ideal-type of purposive-rational action gains another quality as autonomous actions also become invested with a functional character:

We cannot ignore those features of current forms of capitalism that tend to restrict and, to a certain extent, recuperate autonomy, which is not only presented as a possibility or right, but is as it were demanded of people, whose status is increasingly frequently assessed according to their capacity for self-fulfillment (…). (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 429; orig. emphasis)

The social critique sees such work-related changes in processes of subjectification as new objectifications. The subject is robbed of its potential power if it has to take on all responsibilities, duties and risks that self-employed work brings with it and if alternative forms of organizing work are not available. The individual subject becomes the sole bearer of economic processes in and through the ‘third spirit of capitalism’, which is shaped by short-term labour conditions. ‘Flexibility’ and ‘self-fulfilment’ have
become the buzzwords of the ‘new spirit’ as they most strikingly illustrate the dilemma of work as a ‘subjectivizing’ mechanism of objectification in the ‘project-based polis’.

*The artistic critique and its contradictions*

The other form of critique of (industrial) capitalism identified by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), the so-called artistic critique, attends to the dark consequences of having to work in the ‘iron cage’ of bureaucratic normalization and its technocratic, disciplinary and dehumanizing mechanisms of alienation and suppression. For Boltanski and Chiapello, the student protests of May ‘68 and its aftermath epitomize this kind of emancipatory critique, which denounces and fights paternalistic structures of authority and Taylorist forms of production, and which seeks to recover individual autonomy, authenticity and creativity. However, according to Boltanski and Chiapello demands for more creative freedom and autonomy – for more playfulness and less hierarchical control – have helped to re-develop capitalistic processes of organizing. Capitalism’s adaptation and incorporation of artistic-critical demands would therefore once again necessarily become – in an almost dialectic dualism of both forms of critique – a subject-matter of social critique, as it would contribute to the inequalities at hand. Social critique, with its maxims of equality and justice, is defined as a force of resistance. Its demands are partially adapted by capitalism because the intensity of resistance is too strong to be blocked off. The creation of the second spirit of capitalism – as it played out in a social market economy with a stronger emphasis on social welfare – can therefore be interpreted as the reaction to a criticism that denounced the exploitation of the working class (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 201). In contrast, artistic critique prefers subjectivist rejection to collective resistance. It therefore makes theorems available to the third spirit of capitalism which are translated into the subjectification of the organization of labour:

>T]he new spirit of capitalism is distancing itself from social capitalism under state planning and control, which is viewed as being old school, too narrow and too stifling, and bases itself much more on the artistic critique (authenticity and creativity). [...] The new spirit is turning away from the social demands being made [...] and is opening itself to a critique that denounces the mechanization of the world and the destruction of life forms that help to promote the actual human potentials and especially creativity. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 201)

Artistic critique, opposing aesthetic play to the servitude of formal work relations, thus seems to have become both helpmate and think-tank of a new formation of capitalism that goes hand-in-hand with the project-related particularization and fragmentation of society for the sake of making profit:

>By adapting these sets of demands to the description of a new, liberated, and even libertarian way of making profit – which was also said to allow for realization of the self and its most personal aspirations – the new spirit could be conceived in the initial stages of its formulation as transcending capitalism, thereby transcending anti-capitalism as well. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 201)

With this diagnosis, Boltanski and Chiapello deliver the blueprint for the thesis that play has become the match-ball of capitalist utilization processes and thus an integral part of current organizational control mechanisms. Artistic critique understands alienation not as being an indispensable consequence of, or equal to, objectification; rather, it ascribes...
to the subject a usurping stance vis-à-vis the possible conditions of objectification. Close to the early Marxist argumentative position on the emancipatory character of work, it perpetuates the notion of freeing oneself from (a certain kind of) work not through but in work. Contrary to this, the social critique – in continuation of the economic-theoretical Marxist position – conceives of capitalist socioeconomic conditions as the cause of the prevention of a liberation from work through and in work.

On not accommodating paradox

Against the backdrop of our discussion of the paradoxical constitution of work, it can now be shown how both forms of critique deal with, and are haunted by, the paradox of work.

Social critique sticks to the dichotomic scheme of the transformation of labour conditions from the working subject to the subjectivized object of work; its conceptual force rests on (and is legitimized by) the reiteration of this dualism. Against the processes of capitalist subjectivization, it postulates an antithetical objectivization; the dilemma can only be resolved – hypothetically – by overcoming it.

Artistic critique wants to overcome the contradiction of work through a particular way of exercising it. It attempts to postulate a liberation of work in work – a move that reproduces the paradox of work by translating meaning-in-itself into an instrumental, functional paradigm, but that thereby cannot but contradict its presuppositions. In this case, however, the ‘dysfunctionality’, ‘inoperability’ or disinterestedness of aesthetic play cannot be absorbed by work. The difference between artistic and social critique not only resides in the observation that the topoi of artistic critique can more easily be claimed by a capitalist logic of exploitation due to their individualized character. The salience of this difference lies in the fact that the artistico-critical topoi – in contradiction to the ones of social critique – are ‘alienated’ in terms of their enrolment into an economic logic: The dictum of subjective autonomy and the interest of the social individual appears as self-responsibility in economized and marketized form; what cropped up as subjective freedom becomes a straightjacket of self-fulfilment, with the need for meaning displacing ‘conventional’ function-orientation as telos.

Both critiques, then, constitute attempts to disavow the paradox of work. To put it differently, what Boltanski and Chiapello’s analysis seems to lack is a sufficiently complex notion of work. Two contradictory forms of critique are expounded which, although acknowledged to be intertwined, are presented in the form of an antagonistic relation. In the end, what remains for the authors is to place their hopes on a regaining of strength of the social critique as well as, albeit more reservedly, on the future significance of the artistic critique (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 529 et seq.). But can the dichotomy itself be maintained?

It has been noted that, first, the juxtaposition of artistic and social critique – so convincing on first sight – rests upon shaky ground:

[T]here is a world of difference between the discourses for managerial seminars that supply [The New Spirit of Capitalism] with its material and the reality of contemporary forms of capitalist
domination. (…) The opposition between the artistic critique and the social critique is not based on any analysis of historical forms of protest. (Rancière, 2009a: 34 et seq.)

Rancière is particularly dismissive of Boltanski and Chiapello’s reading of May ‘68 as supposedly prioritizing the themes of artistic critique, which would then have been incorporated by contemporary capitalism.

As it happens, concern for creativity at work was foreign to the slogans of the 1968 movement. Quite the reverse, it campaigned against the theme of ‘participation’ and the invitation to educated, generous youth to participate in a modernized and humanized capitalism (…). (Rancière 2009a, p. 34 et seq.)

Second, the distinction of artistic and social critique perhaps too willingly subscribes to the continuation of the classic (class) differentiation between the collective workers’ struggle against exploitation and the individualistic bourgeois striving for autonomous creativity (Rancière, 2009a). At least with regard to contemporary, hybrid and sometimes collective forms of artistic endeavours, this clear-cut division is questionable (e.g. Beyes, et al., 2009). As Lazzerato (2008) comments: ‘To interpret the deep transformation in artistic and cultural practices (…) in order to condemn it for anti-proletarian elitism, like Boltanski and Chiapello (…), is a testament to the impotence of critical thought’. What for Rancière becomes no more than a comfortable reproduction of the ‘melancholic discourse of the left’, and what Lazzerato dismisses as ‘reactionary’, is the double denunciation engendered by the differentiation of social and artistic critique: One is directed at the workings of the capitalist monster, while the other views any possibility of change as illusory. Beyond this double denunciation, there is – nothing; Rancière and Lazzerato therefore hold this ‘simple’ classification of the social world to be anti-emancipatory and an implicit continuation of the status quo.

Third, these assessments can be related to the absence of a paradoxic notion of work: If one perpetuates the dichotomy of function and meaning, then no understanding of work is available that would allow one to think together the tensions of objectification and subjectification, of work as the fulfilment of a function and as a self-referential relation. What remains, in other words, is merely the scholarly ‘work’ of mourning, for instance with regard to the instrumentalization of aesthetic play. The dilemma has only been translated: From the diagnosis of ‘objective’ alienation of workers as cogs in the industrial machine into the diagnosis of objectification through subjectification in the new spirit of capitalism. This way, the demands of social critique are not only in opposition to the interests of capitalist forms of organizing, they also remain antithetical to the thoughts and ideas and different forms of artistic critique (Krempl, 2009).

Less a conclusion than an opening: In defence of play

Is there a way of contemplating work that does not rely on the playing-off of object reference against meaning reference, objectification against subjectification, and that therefore does not try to make the paradox disappear? Departing from a paradoxic understanding of work as outlined above, such considerations would entail a changed view of the dichotomy, as they would refrain from hegemonic prioritisation of one of the contradictory elements. It would need to be acknowledged that the transformation of
labour relations invariably corresponds to a transformation of the social significance and localization of work and that its critique should shy away from dichotomic radicalization. Such critique would not a priori hold artistic-critical ideals and those of social critique to be necessarily antagonistic. In a way, such an approach would attempt to make the ‘old’ social critique a part of the ‘new’ artistic critique, or the ‘new’ social critique a part of the ‘old’ artistic critique. It would not treat function and meaning of work as antitheses, which means that it would not let either work disappear in play or let play disappear in work. Instead, it would need to hold on to and keep open the tension-filled relations between these poles. It would thus be wary of overtly grand generalizations and search for ruptures and re-orderings of these relations.

Thus, in problematizing the dichotomization of social and artistic critique, this perspective would let go of the peculiarly artificial division between social transformation and aesthetic processes. This division usually entails viewing the latter as ‘victim’, as an instrument of superordinate mechanisms – be it through the supposedly playful aestheticisation of the economy, or be it through the economization of aesthetics (Beyes, 2008; Krempl, 2009). We think there are good reasons for abstinence here:

[The collective struggle for working-class emancipation has never been separate from a new experience of individual existence and capacities (...). Social emancipation was simultaneously an aesthetic emancipation, a break with the ways of feeling, seeing and saying that characterized working-class identity in the old hierarchical order. (Rancière, 2009a: 35).

It is Schiller’s play that is invoked here from a critical-emancipative viewpoint. For Schiller, play constitutes the mediating interface between social classes, the latter being interpreted as a representation of the disparate separation of sense and sensuousness.

Accordingly, beauty (...) is rather the common object of both impulses, that is, of the play instinct. The use of language completely justifies this name, as it is wont to qualify with the word play what is neither subjectively nor objectively accidental, and yet does not impose necessity either externally or internally. (...) For, to speak out once for all, man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays. (Schiller, 2004: 30-35, orig. emphasis).

It is therefore play, with its potential moments of freedom and equality, that enables the construction of new forms of collective organization. ‘What aesthetic free appearance and free play challenge is the distribution of the sensible that sees in the order of domination a difference of two humanities’ (Rancière, 2009b: 32). Therefore, in defence of play: When the potential of play is discarded, then the possibility for other organizational forms of working together is dismissed, too. What then remains is the mourning of the situation and the mutual reassurance of the belief that things will not change in any case.

We thus suggest dealing with the lack of a paradoxical notion of work as a theoretical gap into which an aesthetic perspective can be inscribed. Work, then, is understood in a reflexive manner and becomes a producer of paradoxes (that it always has been). The non-utilizing reflexivity of aesthetics is added to the ‘conventional’ utilizing reflexivity of work (e.g. Guillet de Monthoux, 2004). Thereby this ‘model’ resorts to the tautological structure of work discussed above: Ascribing to work the function of
accomplishing references of function is relativized, while at the same time work is given the function to provide self-reference. This way, aesthetic processes must structurally be put on a par with economic activities and their functional character (‘work ≠ work’) without annulling the difference (‘work = work ≠ work’).

For sure, this is no guarantee for a critical organizational theory of work. We think, however, that herewith a sufficiently complex conceptualization of work is at hand in order to research the development of organized labour without denying the possibilities of play. It remains paradoxical: If we cannot reduce the paradox of work into oppositions without contradicting ourselves, and if we cannot resolve the contradictions to arrive at non-alienated labour, then we cannot exclude play’s corruption into work, either. But then again, we would also need to accept the following: that the paradox of work, at the very least, leaves room for play.

references


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On boredom: A note on experience without qualities

Rasmus Johnsen

Most of us probably remember how long and dreary Sundays could be when we were kids. When I think of the boring Sundays in the little town that I grew up in, I for one picture a world, into which someone had plunged a teabag that had been used too many times, leaving everything blotched with a putrid and pale colour. Morrissey, the former singer of the band The Smiths, must have felt something like this when he wrote: ‘Etch a postcard: “How I Dearly Wish I Was Not Here” / In the seaside town that they forgot to bomb / Come, Come, Come - nuclear bomb / Everyday is like Sunday / Everyday is silent and grey’ (Morrissey, 1988: tr. 3). In boredom the world appears empty. But at the same time this emptiness registers as a nauseating tension, a feeling of being fed up with the situation that simply will not pass. It is as if time itself has come to a halt and now literally seems to be swelling like a washed up body on a beach.

Research in work organizations over the last decades have ever more often associated human attributes and the ability of the working subject to perform as a ‘self’ with positive organizational outcome. In this light, it is surprising that boredom, which Kierkegaard considered a despairing refusal to be oneself, and called ‘the root of all evil’ (Kierkegaard, 1987: 281) has not gotten more attention. In comparison to research into stress and ill mental health at work, the phenomenon has largely been ignored. What is more, the studies that do exist, mostly within the fields of work sociology and psychology, rarely touch upon the experience of boredom itself. Instead they engage with either its consequences, with the work situations that lead to it or with individual differences that may indicate who is more prone to it. In this contribution, I want to return to the experience of boredom and explore the curious and frustrating waiting position that it entails in a little more detail. What I will argue is that boredom, as a position where nothing is available for self-expression, where one wants to be active, but does not know how to act, may be viewed as ‘experience without qualities’.

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1 I borrow the term from Elizabeth S. Goodstein’s excellent work on the concept of boredom and its role on modernity: Experience Without Qualities – Boredom and Modernity (2005).
Boredom in work organizations

Mentioned among negative corollaries of boredom in work organizations are not surprisingly low job satisfaction and performance, alcohol and drug misuse, counterproductive behaviour, depression and work-related injuries (Loukidou et al., 2009). Early studies of work situations focused on external factors like repetitiveness and monotony as causes of boredom that may ultimately be harmful to worker health (e.g. Davies, 1926; Bartlett, 1943). Later research has dealt more with the effect that monotony has on internal factors like attention. Here there seems to be a general agreement, that attention will deteriorate and be expressed as lower performance, when a boring or uninteresting task must be performed (e.g. Damrad-Frye and Laird, 1989; Perkins and Hill, 1985). Similarly, processes of formalisation and routinisation of rules, procedures and norms in institutional settings have been found to provoke boredom, either by reduction of the variety of stimulation or by placing limitations on what is considered acceptable behaviour and activities from the organization’s perspective (e.g. Fischer, 1993).

Other studies again revolve around individual differences, i.e. the relationship between boredom and the levels of stimulation that individuals require to function optimally. A differentiation between the transient state boredom and the more pervasive and enduring trait boredom (Watson et al., 1988) has been essential to the development of the notion of boredom proneness as a measurable personality trait. Farmer and Sundberg (1986) suggested the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS) as an instrument to operationalise boredom as a personality trait, which has been used (along with a few other tools like it) in personnel selection and to develop the rewards processes used in organizations (Loukidou et al., 2009). It has been suggested for example that employees who score high on the BPS are better suited to jobs providing immediate rewards and should not be placed in monitoring and high vigilance jobs (Wallace et al., 2003).

Boredom as experience without qualities

Common to the research perspectives on boredom in work organizations, which no doubt have important practical value, is not only that they barely discuss the experience of boredom, but also that they approach the phenomenon from an angle that will ultimately be counterintuitive to the bored. This in a way is quite understandable, for we feel that we know what boredom is like anyway. Take an everyday situation like a late afternoon lecture on the subtleties of film noir minimalism in Jean-Pierre Melville’s Bob le flambeur (1955). This lecture may be very boring to me. But it may be a hit with my more Francophile colleague, who as we make our way home afterwards cannot stop talking about it. Boredom, in other words, appears to be a subjective interpretation of a given situation or of a discrete object, which is waiting for us to reflect on it. Whether we focus on the causes of boredom or on boredom proneness, this is the adopted perspective.

But in reality this description does not come close to how the bored experience boredom. If we ignore for a moment the argument that it might be reasonable to make a distinction between the everyday kind of boredom in the example above and a deeper,
more pervasive experience like the *tedium vitae*, then Seneca’s description may help us understand why this is so:

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? But do all things go in a circle? Night overcomes 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 seasick [*fit aliquando et huiusreinausia*]. There are many who judge living not painful but empty. (Seneca, 2004: 120)

What Seneca presents us with here, is not a two-stage act of receiving a neutral object and then glossing it over with an interpretation. No organization is made by a reflection subsequent to the experience of the phenomenon that appears. No raw material is given external to the self-sameness of the world that makes the bored think of life as empty (as this would make his initial question easy to answer). Rather, it is the other way around. The unbearable presence and clarity of a world that makes the bored nauseous in all its obviousness is conditioned by the experience itself. It is the experience of the world as a tautology that gives him access to the ‘materiality’ of reality. In Heidegger’s terms, Seneca’s *tedium vitae* is ‘world-disclosive’. The primary is not a situation in which he ‘chooses’ how to deal with the objects that he is facing and then finds them boring, it is *his experience itself that is without qualities*.

What is uncovered here is an experience of boredom that is not as simple as it was made out to be above. We find ourselves suddenly confronted with a new field of inquiry that is concerned with discerning and evaluating the interpretive situation, which makes the world appear as it does and which confronts the forms and limits of our powers of interpretation. It is a situation that reveals something about us, about who we are, where we come from, what we hope for and – not least – what interests us. Another way to put this is to say that in the experience of boredom, identity is turned into a problem, a question, into something fundamentally precarious.

**Time and the failure of imagination**

In boredom identity becomes a problem as the teleology of the self is fundamentally questioned. But what does it mean to speak of this experience as *experience without qualities*? Consider the example of listening to music. When we listen to a melody, we naturally take it to be a unity although it passes through different notes, pitches and rhythms. To hear a melody, then, and not just the variety of single notes, presupposes the ability to retain the already sounded notes as a context against which the sound of the present note is experienced. Similarly, hearing this present note as one that anticipates further musical development is necessary in order for us to experience the whole of a melody. To listen to a melody, in other words, means being able to ‘hear’ what is not present at the moment. Husserl called this the synthesis of *protention* (the anticipation if what is yet to come), *presentation* (the momentary impression) and

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2 The example of listening music is often used to describe what Husserl calls ‘the inner time consciousness’ that established the experience of continuity. I here draw on John Russon’s use of it in *Human Experience – Philosophy, Neurosis, and the Elements of Everyday Life* (2003).
Retention (retaining what has just been experienced as it slips away) (Husserl, 1991). Whoever listens to a melody must come to ‘inhabit’ the music, both in order to integrate what has already sounded and to anticipate where it moves from here. Another way to put this is to say that experiencing music in a very acute sense entails the ability to ‘tell time’. This synthesising capacity of maintaining as a definitive aspect of the present that which is not itself present – the past and the future of the melody – is what we traditionally refer to as imagination, not of course in the sense of fantasy, but as the synthetising ability to entertain diversity within a single conscious act.

Imagination in this respect is not only proper to listening to music, but constitutes a fundamental condition for meaningful experience as such. As John Russon puts it, ‘all our experiences carry on something like this melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic flow whereby one moment seems to grow out of the last and melt into the next in a way that “keeps the tune going”’ (2003: 13). If we return for a moment to Seneca’s description, this aspect of rhythmic differentiation is what seems to be affected in boredom. It is not that the ‘tune’ does not ‘keep going’ – on the contrary – but the melody of the world has been reduced to a single monotonous tone, a drone that does not change at all. In this sense, boredom can be thought of as a failure of imagination. The result of this failure is the frustrating feeling that time will not pass.

The experience of boredom as a rupture of the self-differentiating flow of time is very well illustrated by the German word for boredom, ‘Langeweile’, which literally means a long while. The title of Louis Althusser’s autobiography L’Avenir dure longtemps (The Future Lasts a Long Time), which was published in The United States as The Future Lasts Forever (1994), in a subtle way plays on the same experience. To the bored the present seems to be dragging itself along unbearably, it is as if nothing leads up to it and nothing will come of it. Along with the feeling that the present will not pass, comes the feeling that all eternity is going to be like this, that forever is reduced to the self-sameness and obviousness of a single moment. Althusser’s anticipation is of a future painfully reduced to univocality. Similarly, when Seneca writes of life as empty, rather than painful, this can be taken as an indication that boredom entails the feeling of having seen it all. This is what it means to speak of boredom as experience without qualities. It is an indication of the inability to employ the synthesis of imagination, which will differentiate the present by associating it with that which is not present at the moment. Boredom is experience without qualities, not because the bored ‘chooses’ to interpret a given situation as boring, but because the synthetic process of imaginative interpretation is somehow failing to ‘open’ it to her.

The expressive qualities of the social environment

Another way to think of this failure of imagination is as a call that is not answered. The social environment seems to be demanding something, which the bored fails to reply to. We encounter such expressive qualities – that phenomena are somehow interpretatively charged to lead us in a certain direction – in most everyday objects. A light bulb, for

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3 See also Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008:75ff.
example, directs us towards the socket in the lamp at the table we are working at. Similarly, when we want to change lines in the Paris underground, the signs guiding us through the metro stations lead us in the direction we want to go. After a while in the city, we become so used to it that we hardly think about moving through the tunnels anymore – that is until a redirection interrupts the routine and we find that we are lost and perplexed by the rift in the steady flow of the morning traffic. Abstract situations that are more or less standardised by culture, value and history, like important biographical transitions (entering school or marriage, graduating, retiring or becoming parents), carry the same kind of latent expectation that let us pass through them together as the individuals of a community.

That the qualities of experience are not merely presented to us, but are conditioned by the way they compel us to take a certain direction in our expectations of how things are going to turn out, leads us toward another important aspect of the experience of boredom. To the bored, who has lost the imaginative ability to ‘tell time’, the feeling of intense displeasure or even disquietude that follows, may be thought of as an inhibition registering as a need for activity, when one does not know how to be active. One wants to do something, but does not how to act in an appropriate way to that urge. Another central problem in boredom then is the diffuse urge to act on the demand that the experience of the situation is pregnant with, but which the bored is unable to satisfy.

If we think again of the example of listening to music, we sometimes find ourselves in situations in which we have to ‘develop an ear’ for what we hear. The first time most people encounter Balinese Gamelan music, or a symphony by Schönberg for example, they will find it difficult to make sense of what they hear. In most day-to-day dealings, we are dependent on the routines and habits that help us cope with the situations or objects that we encounter. We can think of such routines and habits perhaps as a kind of ‘life-support systems’ that enable us to find our way through the world without having to make explicit reflective decisions. To be ‘familiar with’ a situation ultimately means to inhabit it in a way that lends it form, content and relative duration. But as Peter Sloterdijk remarks, such interpretively charged environments, or ‘atmospheric-symbolic places’ as he calls them (Sloterdijk, 1998: 46), need to be continuously ventilated. The symbolic air-conditioning of our life-support systems – that is our habits, routines and traditions – that he refers to as the primordial production of every society, is a necessity for our being-in-the-world. If we continue this metaphor, what the bored experiences is the stale air of a life-support system that she fails to open to ventilation. The bored, whose synthetic imaginative faculty is failing, is literally choking on too much reality, as the experience of any kind of negativity, deferral, ambiguity or concealment is absent.

What is worth holding onto here is that the bored does not necessarily lack the urge to act (if we accept, at least, that the experience of boredom entails the urge to do something, even if one does not know exactly what). What the bored lacks is the skill or know-how to interact with the demand or anticipated fulfilment that the situation or phenomenon requires of her.
Melancholy, acedia and the instinct for self-preservation

The interpretation of boredom as a reaction to the feeling that one does not know how to make sense of the immediate social environment brings us closer to its role and place in cultural history. We are used to think of boredom as a universal phenomenon; and we have done so here too, by drawing on Seneca’s work. But ‘boredom’ also has a more specific meaning that ties it to the social changes that took place in modernity. The concept of boredom that arose out of the age of Enlightenment was specifically associated with the structural transformations of modern societies and its problems in dealing with the decline of traditional – especially religious – ways of making sense of the world.

Unlike its ‘sisters’ melancholy and acedia that resonated primarily with traditions extending into antiquity, the notion of boredom is part of the cultural vocabulary, which draws on the secular vision of the body as a reservoir of an abstract force that can be depleted. If melancholy implied a deviance from the optimal homeostatic balance of humours, and acedia despair at loosing connection with the divine, the notion of boredom deals with the disenchantment of the world and with strategies for stabilising identity in a constantly transforming reality. Thus, whereas both melancholy and acedia (in different ways) were associated with the nature of the self, boredom is specifically linked to the pressure exerted on the subject by external reality. The experience of empty, meaningless time in this way is tied closely to the material effects of modernisation. As a concept, boredom is configured as a vocabulary for a kind of subjective malaise, where the romantic longing for an authentic reunification of the meaningfulness of the world is no longer an option. While such a longing is still palpable in much of the 20th century writings on alienation and social critique in the tradition of Benjamin, Adorno, Kracauer and others, boredom, as the experience discussed above, implies a resignation to which traditional frameworks of meaning are no longer viable. If an essential part of the cultural vocabularies of melancholy and acedia was a longing, either for a lost time of more authentic being-in-the-world, or for a better world to come, then in boredom the loss of meaning registers only as a resignation to the hollow emptiness of the self and to the dull matter of worldly experience that no longer makes sense.

This last point can perhaps be illustrated by thinking, as Elizabeth S. Goodstein (2005: 398) does, of boredom as a concept that comes close to Peter Sloterdijk’s ‘cynicism’ in The Critique of Cynical Reason (1987). To Sloterdijk, the discontent in our culture has assumed the quality of a universal, diffuse cynicism, the decisive change of which lies in a new, disenchanted mode of experiencing self and world. Cynicism, according to Sloterdijk, is the emblem of enlightened false consciousness, that is, a modernized unhappy consciousness, where the cynics ‘know what they are doing, but they do it because the force of circumstance and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language’ (Sloterdijk, 1987: 5). Cynicism is a reaction to disenchantment, to the dulling of the matter of the world, which transforms the problem or question of meaning into a ‘survival mechanism’.

4 For an excellent discussion of boredom as a specifically modern rhetoric strategy, see Elizabeth S. Goodstein’s Experience Without Qualities– Boredom and Modernity (2005).
If we return for a moment to the failure of imagination, that is, to the inability to
differentiate a given life-situation in a way that makes it a meaningful experience, then
we can think of boredom in terms of a mode of self-preservation like this. As an instinct
for self-preservation, what boredom does for the bored is to transform a threatening loss
of meaning into a lack of something. What is exchanged here is the anxiety provoking
failure to produce the know-how to interact with the anticipated fulfilment, which the
social environment requires, for the paradoxical experience of being ‘fed up with
nothing’ in which the world appears empty. In other words, what the bored experiences
as the dullness of matter and is consequently disgusted with, ensues from a stalemate
between the inability to engage with a life-situation and the latent significance of the
situation that calls her to complete it.

Boredom, anxiety and the fear of losing control

Such an interpretation of boredom resonates very well with the understanding of the
phenomenon in psychoanalysis. Here it is sometimes found in analysis when the
analysand has ‘nothing on her mind’. The bored seems to have no fantasies at her
disposal whatsoever. In reality, though, analysis reveals that there was ‘cognitive
content and corresponding feelings, but that the emergence into consciousness was
immediately opposed by ideas evoking some feeling of anxiety or loss’ (Wangh, 1979:
517). The bored analysand is caught up in a stalemate between wish and fear that
registers as the sensation of time standing still and as a feeling that nothing is
happening. Traditionally, psychoanalysis interprets this as an unconscious fear that the
wish or fantasy might lead to an action of libidinal or aggressive character – for
example the impulse to masturbate or strike out. The concurrent opposition is strong
enough to prevent any recognition of content, but it does not erase the unpleasurable
sense of pressure. Hence the analysand registers a restless and uncomfortable feeling of
boredom.

While this is not the place to go any further into the subtleties of psychoanalysis, the
intuition that boredom registers as a defence directed against the experience of a loss of
control when we are confronted with situations where our responses seem to us all of a
sudden insufficient or even threatening, is very important. As a failure of imagination
occurring when we experience the restraint of a lack of means to engage meaningfully
with the world around us, experience without qualities may very well be thought of as a
defence mechanism. The experience of boredom in this light acquires a self-annihilating
character, as it is directed not towards pleasure, but away from anxiety.

Boredom in a globalised world, where information processing becomes ever more
important, and the ability to ‘just be yourself’ is more predominant than ever, for this
reason is an issue that should be dealt with beyond the mere questions of cause and
effect. The experience without qualities, as the deficit of a self that struggles to come to
terms with the diffuse normative demands of the contemporary world, needs to be
scrutinised on an experiential level with the same severity of attention as that of more
conventional pathologies like stress and depression, also in organization and
management studies. After all, the one who just kills time out of boredom forgets who
holds the knife.


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The work of games

Jacob J. Peters

My heart sunk as the introduction to Games of Empire (GoE) began with a recounting of scene in Second Life – was this to be an analysis of the possibilities of virtual life tempered with warnings that the means of such life are brought to you by Empire? Three paragraphs later, the simple acknowledgement that Second Life avatars consume electricity produced somehow on servers located somewhere made the stakes of the book clear and allayed any such fears. This simple acknowledgement turns out to be a major intervention into video games studies that leads towards an analysis that deals with the whole life of a game: The labor process that makes the game, the infrastructural requirements of its play, its relation to resource extraction, the game’s ideological roots, and above all, how war and global capitalism became both the context and content for many games. Or as the authors put it, the book is about ‘the interaction of virtual games and actual power in the context of Empire, an apparatus whose two pillars are the military and the market … video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire’ (xiv-xv, emphasis in original). Most surprisingly and productively, the book reads well regardless of opinion on Hardt and Negri’s theorizing of Empire and Multitude – this is an empirically rich text that makes clear that anyone interested in the military-industrial-educational complex and capitalism’s emerging extractive strategies would benefit from taking some time to think about video games.

GoE is about games and organizations, not gamers – yet many of the book’s claims demand another book with a similar framework focused on the actual play of games and people who play them. When the book does delve into game play and the sort of subjectivities supposedly produced via game play, there are some questionable sweeping judgments about subjectivity that temper my excitement for the book. This is not a minor issue, as one of the primary means through which the book’s arguments are advanced is subject formation: Video games ‘reassert, rehearse and reinforce Empire’s twin vital subjectivities of worker-consumer and soldier-citizen’ (xiv). Although this sounds solid and true, there is a larger conversation about subjectivity and capitalism at stake here. Such an assertion about games and subjectivity deserves some skepticism, as the actual acts that constitute virtual gaming are part of people’s complicated lives.
Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter often tend toward collapsing the subjectivities dreamed of and demanded by particular forms of the state or capital into a general vision subject-making/becoming engendered through gameplay. A consideration of gamers with the same material rigor that GoE applies to games would complicate statements such as ‘virtual play … makes becoming a neoliberal subject fun’ (xxx). There is certainly an ideological element to playing games, but this is far from the same thing as becoming a neoliberal subject, and it is worth questioning what it means to consider a whole person a ‘neoliberal subject’. Yet, enabling this conversation is a crucial development for video games studies and scholarship that takes Empire out of the abstract and through the complex processes of an industry. Thanks to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter it is now far easier to get to the interesting and challenging questions and to the details of the material world of gaming; this is a fantastic book to argue with about important questions, it asks the right questions and provides a useful framework for thinking about video games.

GoE always works to place video games in the context of Empire, of ‘governance by global capitalism’ (xv). This means starting from an understanding of Empire as rooted in critiques of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s trilogy of Empire, Multitude and Commonwealth: ‘By Empire, we means the global capitalist ascendancy of the early twenty-first century, a system administered and policed by a consortium of competitively collaborative neoliberal states, among who the United States still clings, by virtue of its military might, to an increasingly dubious preeminence’ (xxiii, emphasis in original). Although GoE came out prior to Commonwealth, this last volume is probably the best of Hardt and Negri’s work to be read in relation the gaming industry. GoE answers a call in Commonwealth to ‘investigate the “technical composition” of capital or, really, the technical composition of labor to ascertain who produces, what they produce and how they produce in today’s global economy’, precisely the sort of analysis that is sorely lacking in the trilogy (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 131).

After clarifying the stakes of the work, the introduction to GoE provides a very useful short literature review and periodization of ‘Ludic Scholars’. The review is almost too tightly dialectic: It moves from a celebratory period of work to a condemning period, out of which emerges a third branch of scholarship, ‘critical political analysis’. Scholarship in the 1990s on MUDs and MOOs is surprisingly absent – this literature could well inform GoE as it has attempted to work through some issues of intent, authorship and identity/subjectivity. However, the conclusion reached out of this review is dead on – it is crucial to create a shift in video games studies away from a generation of scholarship that deploys Johan Huizinga’s Homo Ludens to place play in a ‘magic circle’ and pull it out of its context. This is no slight to Huizinga, who also set medieval play in the context of ‘declining empires convulsively gripped by plague, war and peasant revolt’, which Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter cite as inspiration for their situating of games in an age of Empire (xxxv).

The first of three sections, ‘Game Engine: Labor, Capital, Machine’, provides the context for locating virtual play by theorizing immaterial labor in relation to the history of how labor is organized in the video game industry, and by developing an analysis of the current dominant structure of the industry using an insightful interrogation of the firm Electronic Arts. Immaterial labor is defined as ‘the way the production of
subjectivity and things are in contemporary capitalism deeply intertwined’, in which early video game inventors are positioned as ‘among the first mass draft of immaterial labor’ (7). This surprising denial of the mass conscription of women in patriarchal family structures performing the labor of childcare and household reproduction leads into a vague description of immaterial labor. Immaterial labor is too easily positioned as ‘measureless’ (27) and requiring digital production skills and ‘playful energies’ (31), neither of which appears to be the case. Fortunately, this chapter is buoyed by a thoughtful history of the technology, gender formation and the professionalization of video game labor. Where *GoE*’s analysis of immaterial labor shines is when focused on the productive antagonisms of capitalism. The history of the video game industry provides several interesting examples of how ‘resistance actively alters the course of capitalist development’, and brings particular forms and organizations of labor into being (32).

While immaterial labor ends up lacking conceptual clarity in relation to the work of making games, the following chapter develops a clear and insightful analysis of how cognitive capitalism works in relation to the video game firm Electronic Arts. Using interviews with video game executives and workers as evidence, *GoE* argues that ‘cognitive capitalism is the situation where workers’ minds becomes the “machine” of production, generating profit for owners who have purchased, with a wage, its thinking power’ (37). Sorting out the relation between shifts in ideologies of work – marked by an increasingly commonsense belief that capital purchases knowledge-labor, which is somehow different from previous labor purchased by capital – and what is going on in the actual labor process of the video game industry remains a large and open question. By delving into labor laws that enable exploitive work practices, *GoE* does an excellent job of locating the conditions of work in legal and geographic conditions, moving into the specifics of how corporations came to take particular forms in particular locations. This is one of the strongest chapters, exposing how the uneven geography of overtime exclusions for ‘creative or intellectual’ in US state and Canadian federal labor laws are a major part of the story of work in the video game industry. This makes clear the stakes for defining some types of work as ‘creative’ (often in the face of workers insisting that their work is routine and not creative), and ideological moves such as calling factories ‘campuses’.

The next section ‘Gameplay: Virtual/Actual’ takes us through three games of empire: The military-industrial-academic triangulation that produced a military training tool and successful commercial franchise, *Full Spectrum Warrior* (*FSW*); the international divisions of labor and infrastructure that drive play in *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*); and *Grand Theft Auto’s* (*GTA*) vision of neoliberal urbanism. The chapter on how and where it became possible to produce a ‘banal war’ experienced through simulations of war in *FSW* is impressive. This is not an exploration of the effects of experiencing war via simulacrum, but rather a history of how, where, by whom and with what funds war simulators were developed – in particular the development of *FSW* at the University of Southern California with funding from the US Army using workers from film and television to make a simulator playable on Microsoft’s Xbox. The previous section setups this chapter beautifully, the workings of cognitive capitalism and the history of the Xbox and its production all come through to make an argument for how *FSW* ‘generates subjectivities that tend to war’ (118). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s
arguments about subjectivity is complexly rendered and convincing in this chapter – subject formation becomes much more complex that emerging out of a video game collision between Empire and Multitude.

The next two chapters are not as strong, but nonetheless offer compelling analyses: First a well trodden analysis of ‘gold farming’ in \textit{WoW}, then a political economy of the \textit{GTA} franchise. In the chapter on \textit{WoW}, massive multiplayer online games are linked to the ambiguity of biopower ‘wielded from above and “biopolitical production” arising from below’ (127). \textit{GoE}’s major contribution to the deluge of writing on \textit{WoW} is an analysis of the division of \textit{WoW} play by geographic region via server location and access. The movement of virtual goods requires people to bridge regions separated by servers – which exposes how video game firms rely upon and struggle with the uneven development of gaming infrastructure. The following chapter that aims to explore ‘neoliberal urbanism’ via \textit{GTA} falls somewhat flat as it appears to use \textit{GTA} and Hardt and Negri’s take on urbanization as proof for each other without meaningfully engaging with actual process of urbanization.

In dialectical form, to argue that video games are a paradigmatic media of empire is to argue that video games are also paradigmatic of the forces that challenge global militarized capitalism. The final section, ‘New Game?’ begins to engage with what these challenges could look like. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter position several games as demonstrating that ‘players can and do fight back against games of empire’ (187). Here the argument about subject formation becomes central: ‘games are machines of “subjectivation” … when we play an in-game avatar, we temporarily simulate, adopt, or try out certain identities’ (192). To follow through with such an argument in the specific context of games would require some work with gamers, and without doing so it becomes easy to misplace causality and simplify complexity. In the chapter ‘Games of Multitude’ this takes the form of privileging the author and narrative: In Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s account, for a game to offer a form of resistance, the game itself must have a narrative or authorial intent of resisting. Some games ‘channel toward imperial subject positions’ whereas others, in an argument developed via Felix Guatarri, ‘generate new ways of perceiving the world’ (214). This section maps the intent of game onto subjectivities produced by its play even in ‘counterplay’ (play in which a game can be played against its intent). Something like ‘counterplay’ could emerge from any number of games – it could come from playing \textit{MarioKart} as easily as from a game such as \textit{Alpha Centauri}, which is argued to possibly be ‘virtually corroborative of … actual activism’ (192). Oddly, earlier in the book it is argued that that the experience of play cannot be mapped onto the ‘manifest content’ of a game, yet the final few chapters fall into this very trap (92). Nonetheless, any future work on game play would benefit from working through the issues addressed here, exploring the way in which ‘games are indeed exemplary media of an order that demands not just the obedience of assembly-line work, but also the mandatory self-starting participation of immaterial laborers and global migrants’ (193).

From the above logic, it makes sense that the solution to ‘corporate games’ that tend toward war is for anti-corporate gamers to create their own games that tend toward something else, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter propose. Such solutions come too close to the liberationist narrative of new media recast for games – all we need to do is
to create better content and that will somehow change problems created by the ownership and control of the means of production and distribution of content. Gamers creating their own content could represent a step toward a different mode of owning gaming infrastructure and hardware, but the second half of this line of thinking is never developed. The book closes with a concise description of the paradox of gaming that makes such an argument – ‘games tend to a reactionary imperial content, as militarized, marketized, entertainment commodities, they also tend to a radical, multitudinous form, as collaborative, constructive, experimental digital productions’ (228, emphasis in original). There remains a missed opportunity here to imagine a future for gaming based on GoE’s rich analysis of the materials, infrastructure and labor that have been organized in particular places, with particular histories to make the video game industry and video games what they are. What would a future of gaming look like with different infrastructure? For example, computing hardware is a constrained commons, and gaming consoles such as the Xbox are a mode of making the common (standards, interoperability, user replaceable parts, etc.) proprietary. Game modders and hackers constantly recreate such commons by figuring out how consoles work and sharing that knowledge. As GoE often mentions, the gaming industry constantly struggles to contain and/or extract the value created in such commons. Reallocating the surpluses upon which game developers’ empires are built is never directly on the table in GoE – console gaming, an inherently proprietary enterprise, is positioned as a permanent fixture of gaming. Fortunately, GoE provides the theoretical and empirical foundation from which to think about how such seemingly fixed realities of the gaming industry came to be and how they may be put to work toward other ends than war and capital accumulation.

references

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The playing fields of late capitalism

Peter Fleming


Neo-liberalism seems to persist through a double life. For sure, it believes in itself like all forms of fundamentalist thought, but it also unconsciously divines its own impossibility. It thus grows outrageous characters to compensate, to fill the void, like a petulant child who invents far-fetching tales after raiding the cookie jar. And is this not also the case today when the corporate world and the public sector tell us that the crime scene of exploitation (and self-exploitation in the immaterial workforce) might be thought of as a kind of playful adventure, a child-like funny game that in the end makes us strategic, rational adults? One of the more amusing accounts of such attempts to imbue play and fun into the rhythms of an otherwise stultifying work-a-day can be found in Ben Hamper’s (1992) laconic account of life in a car factory. Not that dissimilar to the knowledge workhouses that now predominate the global south, labour in this factory was tedious, soul deadening and merely a means to achieve something ‘other’ than work. With the aim of seeking to instill some of that ‘life’ back into a lifeless labour process, human resource managers devised an ingenious plan: Let’s take one of the workers off the assembly line, dress him up in an garish orange cat suit, call him ‘Howie the Quality Cat’ and make him wander the plant, joking with folk and engaging in light-hearted small talk about the virtues of zero-defects.

Unfortunately for the hapless worker who was chosen for the role, his life at the factory moved from merely boring to one of hellish anxiety. Howie instantly become the target of ridicule, practical jokes, and various kinds of humiliating stunts involving fire and oil. Even though Howie still beamed with a big quality cat smile, he slowly began to resemble a frightened stray with a bad case of the mange. And as the pressure mounted he was soon a broken quality feline: to the delight of his fellow workers.

Howie had obviously become the displaced target for worker frustration at the exploitative and needlessly oppressive conditions of factory life. However, what is perhaps more interesting is the complete failure to co-opt the flows of fun and play that has always existed in the subterranean networks forged among workers themselves. A rich tradition of sociological research highlighting the importance of fun and play at
work is instructive here. Workers have long known the benefits of play for escaping the regulative nature of work. Indeed, before some corporate boardroom hack or ‘funsultant’ decided that play might enhance productivity, the informal sphere engendered a space of autonomy and sometimes anti-work sentiment that managers often distrusted since it was beyond their control. Michael Burawoy, Donald Roy and more recently Andrew Ross, for example, have indicated how this well-maintained zone of imperceptibility serves to help workers sidestep the obstructions of cold economic rationality and sometimes subvert it. Indeed, this informal economy of joy not only afforded some relief from the gratuitous nature of organized labour but is often secured at the expense of the managerial prerogative (jokes, wanton sabotage, time wasting, etc.). Commentators have rightly warned about romanticizing this secret life of the organization (such as Collinson, 1992). Nevertheless, its political import in the context of capital/labor relations has readily been noted by researchers, managers and workers alike, especially with regards to autonomy and the potential for democratic self-management.

The role of games and its intersection with fun and play is the topic of Niels Åkerstrom Andersen’s interesting Power at Play (2009). The book seeks to map the emergence of the concept of play within managerial discourse and explain the way in which it disrupts and reinvents fundamental power relations in organizations. From an historical vantage point, Andersen does a good job at demonstrating the various shifts in management forays into play, fun and games ranging from competitive games (1860s onwards), training and simulation games (1955 onwards) and social creation games (1980s onwards). The book, however, is not interested in games and play per se, but the shifting background conditions that such managerial interventions are symptomatic of. As the author argues,

> the epistemological interest of the book pertains to diagnostics of the present and enquires into the reasons why play has exploded over the past 15 years in private, public and voluntary organizations, and what is at stake in this explosion … this includes, not least, the way in which play allows for decision and power to become coupled together and the applications of this. (9)

The analysis of this historical development is important and of much value for any reader interested in games, play and fun in the workplace. While the causes of such discursive permutations are not explored in great depth, the last part of the book – concerned with the ‘social creation games’ – does seem to resonate with the broader trend of corporatizing the protean sociality of the workforce. Such games are diverse, ranging from icebreakers to team building exercises and puzzle solving cells. For example, one team building game consists of ‘reconfiguring a group of loosely connected team members into a productive and dynamic team, capable of self-management, creating own goals and strategies, and establishing its own identity and mutual responsibility’ (60). Here we see simulation and imitation of an organic social relation assuming importance whereby workers imagine what it might be like to work together if it were not for the obstacle of power. But this mimetic feature is complex and must be conceptualized carefully if we are not to cede credit for democratic self-management to the false generosity of the modern firm. Like the Hobbesian justification for the Leviathan, the corporation too would also like us to believe that without it we would be nothing.
Andersen’s book intends to link the recent appearance of games, play and ‘fun’ at work to the articulation of power under different organizational conditions, ranging from what the author terms formal bureaucratic administrative forms to polycentric modes of organizing. The last two chapters entitled ‘Political Play With Boundaries’ and ‘Coupling, Play and Pedagogy’ respectively seek to link games, play and power. The former chapter does so by way of two case studies about a voluntary work organization and a state school context. The latter is more theoretical, conceptually embedding power at the heart of playfulness at work via a well-wrought analysis. The author makes some insightful observations here about how the use of play as a learning tool might function to reinforce control relations through rationalization. Moreover, fun and games might be a method of ushering in more insidious flows of power. In each case, however, the discussion does become a little bogged down in the complexities of Luhmann-inspired analytics (including deliberations about ‘parasitary coupling’; ‘loose coupling’; ‘fixed coupling’; and ‘hegemonic couplings’). Indeed, I would have liked the investigation to move beyond these neo-functionalist pre-occupations and delve more deeply into the political struggles that lie behind the injection of play and fun into workplaces today.

On the topic of power, the book posits a Luhmannian definition:

power is exercised when the power-inferior feels unsure about the power-superior and steers himself from the perspective of the possible intentions of the power-superior. Thus, power presupposes the freedom of the power-inferior … modern power is non-coercion. (140)

Given this arcane and ultra-liberal conception of power, perhaps it is not unsurprising that the book’s analysis of it, even when critical, has difficulties in extricating itself from the pages of management manuals and ‘how to’ handbooks. I certainly did find the wide array of texts referenced fascinating (with titles like Fun and Gains and The Fun Factor). But we do not hear much from the recipients of these occasionally infantile interventions. As Howie the Quality Cat’s singed faux-fur might intimate, a more weighty political register is present here rooted in the struggle for self-valorization, non-exploitation and escape from the ideology of work. Even when the book is critical (which is not difficult when confronted with titles like ‘Making Work Play’ – and why such wordplay is almost mandatory in this genre is beyond me), the analysis is still elaborated mainly from a managerial point of view. Little attention is given to the tension between worker-initiated forms of play against work and the manufactured games and fun exercises designed to deepen work. Indeed, informative here is the vast and silent sub-history in which workers have tried to get by, cope and muster protest within the informal networks of play and games.

If we were to reinscribe play and fun from the point of view of the multitude (which must ironically include managers since they work and are exploited by capital as much as anyone else), then we might identify a kind of constitutive political ‘dark matter’ that lies behind these managerial interventions today. What do I mean by this? One thing that we do know about managerial rationality is that it is not playful or fun at all. We may see fun around the moment of work (since exercises are performed away from the actual task). It might provide the subject matter for play when it fails or when a boss loses their temper. But in and of itself management is the expression of dead labor since in its ideal and distilled form we are fundamentally left with a machinic social task that objectifies and manipulates people. But here is the hitch for the contemporary
corporation and the emergent forms of capitalism. If the production process cannot do without living labor as both its source of value and pre-conditional infrastructure (which is more and more the case today as workers’ emotional and social competencies become the new means of production), then it must invariably turn to this underground economy for vitality and ideas. The corporation assumes a bio-political or ‘biocratic’ dimension when it seeks to prospect life itself. Andersen’s identification of ‘social creation games’ as the most recent paradigm of play is, I think, indicative of this turn to the social for the things that the formal corporate form cannot provide itself. To be fair, the author does touch upon the notion of parasitical supplementation, but seems to immediately get caught in the web of Luhmann’s abstruse systems theory. Analyzing how a ‘learning system’ might connect with a ‘play system’ and vice versa, the author states:

A parasitic coupling is in fact not even a coupling. Instead, I will discuss how a system becomes a parasite on another system when system A unambiguously links up to system B’s motivational side and only perceives B of instrumental benefit for A. This becomes apparent if system A does not relate to the reflections of system B. A observes B as a benefit without independent functionality. (145)

I’m not sure if this is what I had in mind. Let me present an example to explain. The parasitical nature of contemporary corporatism manifest in private, public and voluntary organizations today is no more evident when it comes to fun at work. As noted earlier, the social function of management is generally only funny from an external point of view: When being ridiculed when it fails (think of The Office’s David Brent), is needlessly excessive in its interventions, or ironically when it actually attempts to be funny (Hamper’s poor Quality Cat). It is an old critical truism that the capitalist form inherently cannot reproduce itself by own mechanism. Because it consists of an ossified and formal structure of dead labour it needs a non-capitalist prop to continue. Today this is seen in the immense interest that the firm has in expressions of non-work or even anti-work in order to create a sense of life within the moment of exploitation. In this sense, the corporation does not create play or fun, but taps into play (often originally formed against work) before rendering it into yet another lifeless and often humiliating abstraction. This is no doubt the case in the factory or the IT startup as Ross has very nicely described in his book No Collar (2004). Indeed, when managed fun (including games and planned games) enters the formal discourse of the consultancy firm, the call-centre or wherever, it is often experienced as something non-playful and coercive, and in the case of Hamper and others, the target of fierce criticism. The point is not that workers hate fun, but see it for what it really is: A smoke screen to deepen work and consequently the social factory of unhappiness.

But it is the anti-capitalist and anti-regulative impulse of worker initiated games, play and fun that I think is interesting. This is not simply because of my own particular views, but also because it does go to the heart of the political permutations that are taking place in the world of work and beyond today. The importance of play and frivolity has been explored a great deal in the critical literature given its juxtaposition with economic rationality (see Marcuse [1955], for example, for a wonderful investigation whose erudition is only matched by ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s [2009] recent contribution). Moments of fun might be found within the broader context of work, but the basic axiomatic principles of capitalist rationality are still as anathema to play today
as they were in Weber or Marx’s time. Again this is why the computation of fun represented by Howie the Quality Cat was merely a prelude for some proper play. The fooling around by these workers certainly may have had an unintended effect of inadvertently reinforcing broader class relations (see Burawoy, 1979) but in and of itself still represented a moment of non-work: time wasting, anti-management jokes and various forms of sabotage. On this count, we might do well to reread Ross’ (1988) learned analysis of the Paris Commune and its vertiginous codification in the drunken poetry of Rimbaud (as the child-poet avers to his fellow workers in ‘Blankets of Blood’: It’s our turn! Romantic friends. The fun begins/O Waves of fire, we’ll never work again!). The abolition of these authoritarian structures and the surplus scarcity that maintained them was a joyous and playful moment. Not because it was intentionally designed to be such but because it released the worker from his or her identity, from the imprisoning idiom of the métier. And in a society structured by the ideology of work, this identity includes everyone as Rimbaud’s lyrical scorn attests (bosses and workers/all of them peasants, and common). Self-management and a driving counter-work imaginary transformed the social into living labour, freeing it from the tyranny of compartmentalized roles that had little to do with being human. This event transmuted work into a living activity again, replete with moments of initiative, play and serious non-coercive problem solving (of which the weak and disingenuous simulacra we might find in a HSBC or Google training game). Ross (1988) even suggests that the Commune reactivated a counter-modulation of pleasure and playfulness that was strictly forgetful of work as defined by fathers, teachers, priests and the Gates Corporation. Importantly, this did not mean that things didn’t get done or children went hungry as if the communards were blissfully high on a utopian dream. Indeed, participative mutual aid, co-operation and democratic multi-tasking abound. For it was only after a prolonged, nasty dirty war that this zone of imperceptible sociality came to be termed idleness. Here, on the contrary, ‘by a striking paradox, laziness, remained outside the work order, but moved fast, too fast’ (Ross, 1988: 53).

Of course, none of this is to romanticize the commune or any other instance of democratic self-management (although I see nothing wrong with that per se). It simply intends to argue that when games, play and fun appear as isolated concepts in a discourse of power they cease to have meaning. Or, more accurately, they ought to cease to have meaning. Why? Well, not dissimilar to the reified notion of work, when they are practiced in a democratic milieu of self-management, outside of bosses, deadlines and directives, they are everything and nothing: Play and work collapse into themselves for they are not separate from the world as such, especially once the cultural logic of the ‘boss function’ disappears. In the meantime, the salience of play and games in the realm of contemporary work organizations indicates something is still very wrong. That this suggestion is not raised to the level of a political question only compounds the worry. ‘Let’s play!’ Well, no let’s not, at least not in the manner suggested by an unimaginative consultant.

Andersen’s book offers an extensive and thorough overview of the way in which games and play has evolved and been represented in the business literature. The book has made this reader think about the relationship between play and work in a more serious manner. While play and games are certainly ambivalent figures within the run-away train that we call the ‘modern economy’, I have been invited to reflect on what it might
mean to rediscover the happiness of play, a happiness that perhaps lies beyond capital and labour.

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