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Laborious Play and Playful Work I

[transcript]

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This double issue of Digital Culture & Society addresses the complex thematic field of the dialectics of play and labour. We will take a closer look at the problem of play and work from two overlapping, albeit not mutually exclusive, perspectives: laborious play and playful work.

The term laborious play points to practices and processes that turn playful activities into hard work. Laborious play happens whenever playfulness turns into work, and may be observed in such activities such as e-sports, excessive play, »goldfarming«, and Twitch gameplay broadcasting, amongst many others.

A complementary phenomenon to that of laborious play is the practice and concept of playful work. The promises of a joyful and rewarding working experience have been promoted as »gamification« while critical voices denounce such attempts as ideology, exploitation or simply »bullshit«.

Pablo Abend (PhD) is the scientific coordinator of the Research School »Locating Media« at the University of Siegen. He is interested in geomedia, situated methodologies, participatory culture, and Science and Technology Studies.

Sonia Fizek (Dr.) is a digital games, design and media scholar. She was senior lecturer in the School of Informatics and Design at Abertay University in Dundee. Before joining Abertay, she was a post-doctoral researcher at the Centre for Digital Cultures at Leuphana University Lüneburg. Fizek is an active member of the research community as an associate editor of the Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds, and a board member for multiple initiatives and journals, such as: Digital Culture and Society Journal, Digital Games Research Association (British DiGRA), Replay. The Polish Journal of Game Studies, and Journal of the Philosophy of Games, amongst many others. Her current research focuses on the relationship between digital games and automation. She looks at self-playing games, automated gameplay, and algorithmic players to understand the essence of and the fascination with self-acting playful systems.

Mathias Fuchs (Dr.) is an artist, musician and media scholar. He is the director of the Gamification Lab at Leuphana University in Lüneburg. He is a pioneer in the field of game art and is a leading scholar in game studies and directs a project on Gamification that is funded by the German Research Council (2018-2021).

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Content

Introduction

The Boundaries of Play

Pablo Abend, Sonia Fizek, Mathias Fuchs and Karin Wenz

The distinction between work and play has been the subject of constant debate in many disciplines and subdisciplines. Anthropology is one of the disciplines that has been working on this topic for quite some time. In the year 1978, the time had come to debate the issue once more. Phillips Stevens Jr., an anthropologist at the University of Buffalo, published an article in the fall issue of the newsletter of the "Association for the Anthroplogical Study of Play" (today: "The Association for the Study of Play", or short TASP) entitled "Play and Work. A False Dichotomy". In the submission, Stevens complains that the attempts by anthropologists to distinguish between play and work, albeit being pursued with religious zeal, led to a dead end. He writes:

"What I want to say is this: in our efforts to categorize behaviors which we think fall within, or beyond, the headings of 'play' and 'play-forms,' and especially in our painstaking, even religious, efforts to distinguish conceptually between what is 'play' and what is 'work,' we have gotten ourselves into a rut." (Stevens 1978: 17)

The question now is, whose fault is it? Who is to blame for this "rut"? The answer is clear: It is all Johan Huizinga's fault! According to Stevens, anthropologists have been concentrating on the formal aspects of Huizinga' definition of play to a point where other aspects of games and play have been neglected. Above all, this was at the expense of the experiential components of play (Stevens 1978: 18). But to save Huizinga, Stevens discovered a "forgotten attribute in Huizinga's definition of play" (ibid: 18), namely the characteristic that play is 'absorbing the player intensely and utterly,' (Huizinga cited in Stevens 1978: 18). As a counter-programme, so to speak, Stevens points to the flow research done by Csikszent-mihalyi and his colleagues as an experience at the interface of reward and motivation, which depends more on instrumental factors than on the prospects of an extrinsic reward (Stevens 1978: 18). A reward, such as a wage for the work done, was according to Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues rather the end point of an activity and therefore decoupled from the actual activity, which consisted in the effort to keep the flow experience going, while

"[t]he ending, the scoring of the touchdown, the achieving the summit of the mountain, the final strains of Bach's St. Matthew Passion, all bring the flow experience to an end –

often, [...] an anti-climactic end. lt is the performance itself, the act of creation rather than the thing created, that is the goal being sought in flow." (Stevens 1978: 19)

Stevens derives from the fact that the focus is on the process and not on the fulfilment of duties or tasks, and recalls one of Csikszentmihalyi's conclusions: "It is playfulness that counts, not play itself" (Stevens 1978: 19).

Gregory Bateson reads this newsletter article by Stevens, and is so dissatisfied with the criticism of Huizinga that he reacts with a letter in which he writes about pulled punches and takes a swing at Huizinga's definition: "my complaint is that you criticize bits and pieces of e.g. the Huizinga definition [...], but I wish you had been much more radical. The question is not 'Is the definition good or useful?' But 'Is it a definition?' Is it the sort of thing that we try to produce when we try to define something?" (Bateson cited after Stevens 1979, p. 4) Bateson claims Huizinga's definition to be a "red herring, swimming tail first and muddying the water" (ibid: 3). To structure his critique he adds numbers to the original definition (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Huizinga's definition with Bateson's numbering


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Summing up the formal (1) characteristics
of play we (2) might call it a free (3)
activity (4) standing quite consciously
(5) outside "ordinary" (6) life as being
not (7) serious but at the same time ab-
sorbing the player intensely and utterly.
It is an activity (8) connected with no
material (9) interest, and no profit (10)
can be gained by it. It proceeds within
its own proper (11) boundaries (12) of
time and space according to fixed rules
(13) and in an orderly manner.
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In what follows he goes through each numbered expression. While "(1) and (2) are a fine beginning. We, anthropologists, are doing the summing up and it is to be in terms of our formal characteristics" (ibid: 3), the tone becomes sharper: "'Free' (3), 'conscious' (4), 'no material' (9) and 'profit' (10) are not anthropological formalisms but stereotypes of WASP culture. (3) 'free.' I don't know really what that word denotes in this context." (ibid) The same would apply for (6) 'ordinary' which also means WASP for him: Categories of a White Anglo Saxon Protestant culture. Basically, it seems Bateson is pointing to the naivety and romanticism of Huizinga who projects the layered values and myths of his own race and class privilege.[1] If

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1   It is rather odd that Bateson uses the term WASP here since the term is usually reserved for white Protestants in the United States (often of British descent), and Huizinga, even though he might have been a Protestant, never left his home country the Netherlands.

one ignores the polemics, this reads as a claim to reflect on the situatedness of one's observations and to take the emic perspectives seriously. This also holds true for his discussion of the terms "consciously (5)" and "no material (9)".

For the discussion of work and play, Bateson's comments on the numbers (4) as well as (11) and (12) are particularly instructive.

"(4) 'activity.' An activity. There's the rub. 'Act,' 'action,' 'class of acts,' 'class of actions,' 'class of activities,' 'way of organizing relations between acts,' 'category of actions created by a specific way of native discrimination among actions,' etc. etc. In all definitions, the crucial step is choice of the prime substantive for the predicate. This will determine the logical typing of our definand. [...] *What is needed for the definition is a formal summation of the nature of context.*" (ibid, emphasis by the author)

What is an activity? According to Bateson, this is the biggest issue with Huizinga's definition. Without a contextual embedding, the term is not useful. The same is true of the terms "proper (11) boundaries (12) of time and space". Again, Bateson points out that context is crucial here.

"*Again we bump into a definition of context. Are we talking about the limits of a set or category, which are surely not spatial or temporal?* Or about the boundaries of an action? And in either case, are the boundaries proper to the definand or are they imposed by other (unmentioned) items on the other side of the boundary? Or by anthropologists? Or natives?" (ibid: 3–4, emphasis by the author)

Bateson's criticism is of course in line with his own definition of play. In "Theory of Play and Fantasy" he points out that play always depends on the context and framing. The ability to engage in play is linked to the differentiated sense of the metalinguistic and metacommunicative messages behind it. Bateson's elementary meta-statements about play are "(a) that the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant; and (b) that that which is denoted by these signals is nonexistent" (Bateson 1978: 183).

The far-reaching consequence of his definition is that play does not only address its limits, but also defines the limits of what is not play. For Bateson, the frame is established and upheld by metacommunicative messages which are not necessarily expressed in language. In fact, they consist of implicit signs that convey that something is not meant to be. The statement 'This is play' indicates that the actions that happen next do not signify what the actions they stand for would normally signify. Bateson refers here to the example of the playful nip.

"'These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote.' The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite." (ibid: 180)

One can also understand context here as framing in which the play frame is part of the metacommunication "this is play" (see ibid: 188). Play is then no longer something given, but something that is negotiated, constructed and designed, maintained or rejected. This shifts the focus away from an essentialist conception of play towards an understanding of play as an act of drawing or blurring boundaries. It is not a given but an active achievement of all actors involved, including non-human actors like interiors, or hard- and software. Therefore, the hybridity implied in the terms *Playful Work* and *Laborious Play* is the result of framing play which leads to a blurring of boundaries. This dilution of boundaries does not happen by chance, but becomes a strategy, e. g. of design (when work spaces are playfully architectured), or economics (when play gets monetized). Such an understanding of play can also be found in more recent anthropological definitions of game – usually understood as the relatively stable frame in which play can happen. Thomas Malaby states, for example: "A game is a semibounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes." (Malaby 2007: 96) Here as well, the game is not a given but has to be legitimized. It is furthermore characterized as an artificially created situation of contingency. Establishing the game as a frame for play therefore means creating and managing contingency.

According to this understanding, both work and play become ambiguous figures: If, for example, quantifying hardware is used to monitor one's own game, the game tilts in the direction of increased performance and becomes connectable to ludo-capitalistic exploitation logics (Abend/Kanderske 2020; Egliston 2019). There is a process of game/play exteriorization. Conversely, work takes on a playful character when workplace design is more in line with leisure locations and the workers are relieved of everyday duties, while work practices become gamified.

In late capitalism this collapse of work time and play time may be at least partially explained by the dynamics of the so-called "immaterial labour" (Lazzarato 1996; Terrranova 2000), that is labour the fruits of which are not material, such as knowledge, care or information. As Jennifer Rhee argues in *The Robotic Imaginary* (2018), increased computation of the everyday has contributed to the expansion of immaterial labour. And together with this shift, the times and spaces previously reserved for leisure have turned into sites of labour: "…work no longer happens just at work; it also happens whenever we engage our devices, when we look up restaurants online, stream a movie, send an email or play a video game." (Rhee 2018: 46) All those activities produce informational goods. In the age of big data and machine learning, it seems, rhythms of play conflate with those of work in more intricate and complex ways than ever. Gamification alone, even if thoroughly rethought (Fuchs et al. 2014), does not provide enough answers. Playbour, a portmanteau initially reflecting the drudgery of grinding in MMORPGs, expresses current forms of work/play interferences. As capitalism evolves and 'workifies' (to playfully turn the logic of gamification upside down) all aspects of our lives, the meaning of play changes.

As T. L. Taylor puts it in the interview in this special issue:

I've always been interested in the ways the distinctions between play and labour actually don't empirically hold. We move through playful and laborious states in complicated ways with games. This means that we have play that looks like work; or play that doesn't look like "fun." Play that can be hard. And then by contrast, especially with esports players or live streamers or even certain types of MMO players, the work they do when gaming can also be "fun" and playful and pleasurable.

Playbour often has been described as an effect of competitive gameplay when players engage for hours with the game they play, plan training sessions, record their gameplay and discuss how to improve as a group, develop strategies, engage in theorycrafting and thereby approach a game in a scientific way (Glas 2014; Karlssen 2016; Paul 2011; Taylor 2006; Wenz 2012). But playbour can also be described as an effect of game design when MMOs introduce not just a grind system to level up and improve equipment of one's game character but add a system of daily quests with special rewards, seasonal events again with special rewards for those players engaging in them and timed events every few hours in game as well. This offers players always something (new) to do in the MMO they play but can also lead to a long list of activities they have to finish daily in case they want to belong to the highest ranked players in a MMO. Then play might "look like work or [...] doesn't look like 'fun'" anymore but as a chore to accomplish.

All the authors included in this special issue address the complex question of work and play in diverse ways. The three contributions in the first section of this special issue are theoretical reflections on the interrelation of work and play. Daniel Pargman and Daniel Svensson investigate this relation with a specific focus on esports and the "sportification of games". They analyse esports from a background of traditional sports and extreme sports. They ask: "How do games become sports?" Sportification is a process in which specialisation of equipment, organization, standardisation and rationalisation of training practices, strengthening the scientific bases for this training and the movement to an international, global practice and commercialisations take place. Esports shows all necessary characteristics to be called a sport nowadays. One of the aspects of esports they are particularly interested in is the materiality and spatiality in computer-mediated sports. They show that sportification makes no difference between work and play. They understand sports as a link between both: "containing both while simultaneously exploring and challenging the boundaries between them."

While Pargman and Svensson focus on labour, Rainforest Scully-Blaker asks whether there exists a way to rescue leisure from its subservience to labour? As Scully-Blaker emphasises, instrumentalising play within the context of work reflects the logic of late capitalism. His is an attempt to lay bare the ideological machinery that drives games.

Ideology also plays a role in Sebastián Gomez contribution. He searches for the link between gamification and neoliberal governmentality and finds out that the automated regime of affection and cognition plays an important role in this respect. The proposal is based on practices of self-optimization and the erasure of difference in games and in gamified environments. What he finds there are techniques of attention control as a means to regulate bodies and individuals.

In the second section of this special issue we find contributions focusing on specific case studies..

Work and play are not only abstract categories. More importantly, they reflect gendered labour values at play. Bonnie Ruberg and Amanda L. L. Cullen investigate the culture of gameplay streaming by focusing on emotional and affective labour of female streamers, playbouring over such platforms as Twitch or YouTube. As the authors argue, women streamers perform and in effect monetize diverse types of affective labour: cultivating feelings in viewers, performing feelings, managing feelings and in endeffect using feelings to build personal brands.

Looking at aspects of game production as well as the consumption of those, Mark Johnson critically investigates "troll" and "kaizo" levels built with Super Mario Maker. The design is based on an attitude also labelled "masocore" game design. The games developed form a sub-genre featuring extremely frustrating or challenging experiences for players striving for discomfort and upset to be a part of their play.

In his article Jan Torge Claussen looks at the process of learning a popular musical instrument with the help of a video game. Learning any traditional music instrument requires much effort in several skill areas, for example, dexterity, hearing, sight-reading, and performance. The empirical study conducted by the authors focuses on the various aspects of playful work and laborious play involved in learning an instrument, found in both music education and guitar games. In an experiment, university students used the popular game *Rocksmith* to learn the guitar within 30 days. The results hint to a tension between practicing and playing a musical instrument which can also be found in traditional musical practice and education.

The last section of this special issue introduces new, ongoing research on playbour under the headline *Entering the Field.* The first contribution is by Alexandra S. Catá, who presents Twitch and related work/labour issues in her text on the *Convergence of Rhetoric, Labor, and Play in the Construction of Inactive Discourses on Twitch*. She uses a quote from one of the most popular streamers on Twitch, Tyler "Ninja" Belvin, who clearly stated: "I don't play with female gamers." Cata analyses the the rhetorical implications that this statement has on the Twitch gaming community, the exclusion of female gamers (and other minorities) and how this perpetuates power structures. Ninja's statement and the following discourse around it point to online harassment of minorities on Twitch. Ninja and other influential streamers do not actively use their status as celebrity on the

platform to change the situation actively. They thereby seem not "to recognize his own rhetorical power and reach".

The second contribution under Entering the field investigates leisure but in the context of games. J D A Winslow takes a look into another field of leisure activities: reality TV shows. He observes how the audience of *Made in Chelsea* enjoys watching others play and attests that the lives, loves and personal problems of wealthy young people living in London displays an image of a "post-work world". Winslow's proposal is radically different to other authors' suggestion of play and work coalescing. He states that work has disappeared completely and that all that is left is play. At least for the group of rich youngsters he has in mind this might well be true.

An interview with T. L. Taylor, one of the leading experts on esports, complements the debate on labour and play. Taylor discusses the difficulty to distinguish between labour and play when we look at esports but she also points out that playing games already includes both elements, even if not played professionally: "We move through playful and laborious states in complicated ways with games." This is even more the case when investigating esports and live streaming. With sportification we also observe an increase in numbers of those who follow and watch live streaming and their favourite players. Not only the relation of players, especially in esports, to the industry but also the audience construction of viewers of live streams and exclusion are topics she investigates. She points out similarities and differences to traditional sports and the specific problems players and streamers experience in this relatively new emerging industry.

As the current publication demonstrates, the need to understand the dynamics of both work and play is still vivid in the academic community. With Laborious Play, the first of the two issues on work and play, we want to provide a multidisciplinary platform for further discussion on the ever more contested work and play categories.

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