Playbour, farming and leisure

Joyce Goggin

abstract

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:

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).[1]

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

Baptiste, N.R. (2009) 'Fun and well-being: Insights from senior mangers in a local authority', *Employee Relations*, 31(6): 600-612.

Bolton, S.C. and M. Houlihan (2009) 'Are we having fun yet? A consideration of workplace fun and engagement', *Employee Relations*, 31(6): 556-568.

Bowers, D. (2010) 'World wide *WoW*: Upcoming "gold farmers" documentary' [http://www.wow.com/category/world-wide-wow].

Castronova, E. (2001) 'Virtual worlds: A first-hand account of market and society on the cyberian frontier', *CESifo working paper no. 616* [http://www.bepress.com/giwp/default/vol2/iss1/art1/current_article.html].

Castronova, E. (2003) 'On virtual economies', *Game Studies* (3)2.

Chess, S. (2006) 'Playing the bad guy: *Grand Theft Auto* in the panopticon', in *The meaning and culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical essays* N. Garrelts (ed.). Jefferson: McFarland: 80-90.

Connor, S. (2005) 'Playstations. Or, playing in earnest', *Static*, (1)1: 1-11.

Dandridge, T. (1986) 'No laughing matter: Patterns of humour in the workplace', *Organization Studies*, 7(2): 159-170.

Davis, R. (2009) 'Welcome to the new gold mines', *The guardian*, 5 March. [http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2009/mar/05/virtual-world-china].

De Peuter, G. and N. Dyer-Witheford (2005) 'A playful multitude? Mobilising and counter-mobilising immeterial game labour', *Fibreculture*, 5 [http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/depeuter_dyerwitheford.htm l].

Dibbell, J. (2006) *Play money: Or, how I quit my day job and made millions trading virtual loot*. New York: Basic Books.

Dibbell, J. (2007) 'The life of the chinese gold farmer' *The New York Times Magazine*, [http://www.juliandibb ell.com/texts/goldfarmers.html].

Dickens, C. (1999) *Great expectations*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co.

Fleming, P. (2005) 'Workers' playtime? Boundaries and cynicism in a culture of fun program', *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* (41): 285-303.

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin.

Huizinga, J. (1938/1955) *Homo ludens: A study of the play element in culture*. Boston: The Beacon Press.

IBM (2007) *Virtual worlds, real leaders: Online games put the future of business leadership on display*. IBM global innovation outlook 2.0 report. [http://www.seriosity.com/downloads/GIO_PDF_web.pdf].

IGDA (International Game Developers Association) (2004) 'Quality of life in the game Industry: Challenges and best practices', [http://www.igda.org/quality-life-white-paper-info].

Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Jin, G. (2006) 'Chinese gold farmers in the game world', in *Consumers, Commodities and Consumption* (7): 2, May.

Kücklich, J. (2005) 'Precarious playbour: Modders in the digital games industry', *Fibreculture*, 5 [http://journal.fibrec ulture.org/issue5/index.html].

Kant, I. (1914) *Critique of judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard. London: Macmillan.

Lazzarato, M. (1996) 'Immaterial labour', trans. P. Colilli and E. Emory, in P. Virno and M. Hardt (eds.) *Radical thought in italy today*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 133-147.

Postigo, H. (2003) 'From pong to planet quake: Post industrial transitions from leisure to work', *Information, Communication and Society* 6(4): 593-607.

Postman, N. (1984) *Amusing ourselves to death*. London: Methuen.

Schiller, F. (1982) *On the aesthetic education of man: In a series of letters,* trans. E.M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sotamaa, O. (2003) 'Computer game modding, intermediality and participatory culture', [http://www.Uta .fi/~olli.sotamaa/documents/sotamaa_participatory_culture.pd].

Vincent, D. (2011) 'China used prisoners in lucrative internet gaming work: Labour camp detainees endure hard labour by day, online "gold farming" by night', *The Guardian*, 25 May [http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/25/china-prisoners-internet-gaming-scam].

the author

Dr. Joyce Goggin is an Associate Professor of literature at the University of Amsterdam where she also teaches film and new media, and a contributing emeritus member of Amsterdam University College where she served as Head of Studies for the Humanities from 2008 to 2010. Her research focuses on literature, film, painting and new media, which she approaches from an economic perspective, and she has published articles on gambling, addiction, and finance in various cultural media. Dr. Goggin's other interests include comic books and graphic novels and she has recently co-edited a collection of essays entitled *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form* (McFarland, 2010).
E-mail: J.Goggin@uva.nl