



Call for papers for an *ephemera* conference

Games, incorporated

Malmö, Sweden

2nd–3rd June 2022

Conference organizers:

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Games now permeate our lives on an unprecedented scale. We play mobile games on our daily commute. We collect XP and unlock virtual rewards as we go about our normal work. We use augmented reality to catch Pokémon during our lunch break. We learn on-the-job skills with the aid of a VR headset and a personalized avatar. We relax by playing online role-playing games with our friends in the evening. It is no exaggeration to say that we now live in a ‘ludic society’ (Mäyrä, 2017), one that is oriented around digital imaginaries in the spheres of work, leisure, education, and human relationships.

In this call for papers, we invite scholars to reflect on the meaning and significance of games – whether analogue or digital – for understanding organizational life in its broadest sense. Ten years have passed since the *ephemera* conference on *Work, play and boredom* (Butler, et al., 2011). Over the last decade, the organizational imperative to play has only intensified – a phenomenon that has not gone unnoticed by organization scholars (Dymek and Zackariasson, 2016; Vesa and Harviainen, 2019; Woodcock and Johnson, 2017). Managers are telling their employees not just to have

fun at work; they are encouraging them to treat their job as a game (Mollick and Werbach, 2015). The aim is to generate a feeling of ‘blissful productivity’ (Kumar and Herger, 2013) among employees, the same feeling we experience when we are engrossed in virtual worlds like *Minecraft* or *League of Legends*. As part of this corporate ludo-system, gamification consultancies such as Bunchball in the US and Insert Coin in Sweden leverage game mechanics to achieve organizational objectives (Burke, 2014; Werbach and Hunter, 2020). Given the corporate emphasis on play, it is no wonder that cultural critic Patrick Jagoda (2020) characterizes our time as ‘the age of gamification’.

There is a utopian dimension to the playful mindset that business gurus seek to tap into. Play is the sphere in which we are relieved of necessity and free to experiment, and so it holds the potential of rewiring work around more intrinsic forms of motivation: pleasure, curiosity, and adventure. To unleash the power of play in society, videogame evangelist Jane McGonigal (2012: 7) says that we ought ‘to live our real lives like gamers’ and ‘lead our real businesses...like game designers’. Mark Zuckerberg (2021) invokes a similar kind of tech-utopia with the concept of the ‘metaverse’, an immersive 3D environment that is totally administered by a multinational conglomerate. ‘You’ll be able to do almost anything you can imagine’, Zuckerberg tells us: ‘Work, learn, play, shop, create’. In a world where work and play are seamlessly blended, employees – so the theory goes – will treat their job as just another playground in which to frolic.

Yet beneath the digital dreamland lurks a bleak reality, a reality that no high-definition gloss can hide. Digital games are not innocent; they are technologies to extract data, track user behaviour, and optimize key performance metrics (O’Donnell, 2014). In the sphere of work, digital play intensifies labour by stealth – a kind of AI-enhanced scientific management, or ‘Taylorism 2.0’ (DeWinter, et al., 2014). For all its promise to emancipate us from the drudgery of work, play may end up accelerating some of the worst trends in contemporary capitalism, such as mass surveillance and labour exploitation. It is a dystopian view of play that is rarely articulated in the business literature, but which is often found in popular culture – Netflix’s *Squid Game* (2021) and the *Black Mirror* episode ‘Fifteen Million Merits’ (2011) being only the most striking examples.

But is gaming also a site of radical politics? Instead of perpetuating neoliberal fantasies of work, games might in fact be able to satirize and

subvert corporate ludification. Consider the Marxist board-game *Class Struggle* (1978) or the autonomist-inspired videogame *Every Day the Same Dream* (2009), games that invite us to reflect on the iniquities of modern society (Woodcock, 2019). More generally, the rise in queer games, feminist games, and counter-games indicate that play can serve altogether different social and organizational ends (Ruberg, 2020). The risk, however, is that even the most revolutionary kind of game just dazzles and distracts us while the capitalist machine grinds on.

In this *ephemera* conference, we want to explore the complex relation between work and play in organizations. We therefore invite submissions that may include, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- The blurring of work and play in contemporary organizations
- Gamification of business, work, and life
- The ethics of play and games in society
- Virtual reality in corporate settings
- Serious play and its discontents
- Strategies of counter-gamification and de-gamification
- Queer, feminist, and activist games
- Philosophical and theological assumptions in play discourse
- The politics of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation
- Business and anti-business simulation games
- Positive psychology and the ideology of flow
- Algorithmic management and digital technologies

Deadline and further information

The deadline for submitting abstracts is **28 February 2022**. Abstracts of no more than 500 words should be submitted in a Word document to one of the conference organizers: Nick Butler (nick.butler@sbs.su.se), Lena Olaison (lo.mpp@cbs.dk), Bent Meier Sørensen (bem.mpp@cbs.dk), or Sverre Spoelstra (svsp.mpp@cbs.dk).

The conference is free for all participants to attend, but registration via email is required. Selected papers from the conference will be published in a special issue of *ephemera*.

The conference venue is Moriska Paviljongen in Folkets Park, in the heart of the Swedish city of Malmö. See here for details (in Swedish): <https://moriskapaviljongen.se/kontakt/>

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