



## Work, play and boredom

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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

work). 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 paper 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 Krempf 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.

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