
Liberating Human Expression

Work and Play or Work versus Play



J. TALMADGE WRIGHT

Critiquing and expanding Huizinga's theory of play in *Homo Ludens*, the author argues for play as a means to access what is real and introduces a new model of play he calls the containment play expression (CPE) to challenge traditional notions about the opposition between play and work. This model, he contends, bridges this gap between phenomenological and Marxian perspectives that view both play and work as accomplishments within a capitalist economic and political context. He then applies his new unitary model of play to computer games and discusses how players negotiate their relationships online in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). **Keywords:** alienation; containment play expression; digital games; human expression; play and work; virtual environment

The Dialectic of Play

DUTCH HISTORIAN JOHAN HUIZINGA (1971) soundly rejected the assumption that humans are and should be oriented toward economic production when he defined play in *Homo Ludens* as a primary mode of our existence. But Huizinga, writing about the post-Feudal period and the play of the aristocracy, always considered play separate from work by virtue of seven qualifications, among them that play was voluntary and that it was an activity marked off from everyday life in what some have called “the magic circle.” He defined play as a special category of human activity quite distinctive from what he viewed as compulsory labor for workers or peasants. Play was simply activity that was not coerced. Work, on the other hand, as alienated or coerced labor, constituted the everyday lives of most people under capitalism, an economic system where play manifested itself through carefully crafted commercial festivals, carnivals, and hobbies. Huizinga naturalized this separation of play from work, which was in

concepts like the “magic circle,” although the separation itself seems decreasingly relevant in today’s society. Play moves everyday life from the purely pragmatic to the symbolic, a trait it shares with ritual, although play is much freer and more spontaneous and disruptive.

I assert that Huizinga’s theory requires updating for the twenty-first century to accommodate the many play forms we now see around us, specifically computer games and other electronic forms of cooperation and competition created by the software industry. Then I look briefly at patterns of interaction from *World of Warcraft* players, one of the more popular massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), which enjoyed over fourteen million subscribers at the height of its popularity. First I explain my theory of play as a development of Huizinga’s concepts, which I follow with a brief look at how we talk about the distinction between play and work.

Play as a Method of Assessing What Is Real

Play is not something distinct from our expressions in the world of either joy or pain. My opposition to the traditional binary split between work and play rests on the realization that play is a way of expressing “being in the world” (Sicart 2014). As Sicart states

We play games, but also with toys, on playgrounds, with technologies and design. And play is not just the ludic, harmless, encapsulated, and positive activity that philosophers have described. Like any other form of being, play can be dangerous; it can be hurting, damaging, antisocial, corrupting. Play is a manifestation of humanity, used for expressing and being in the world. . . . It is not tied to objects but brought by people to the complex interrelations with and between things that form daily life. . . . I am not going to oppose play to reality, to work, to ritual or sports because it exists in all of them. It is a way of being in the world, like languages, thought, faith, reason, and myth. (2–3)

I follow this line of thinking with the assertion that play is a noncoercive relationship, an imaginative method of engaging everyday life in a specific space and time that we may or may not consider an accomplishment but that is, in any case, accompanied by a sense of well-being. Play is a method of testing and distinguishing what is real and what is illusionary or fabricated. Children, for example, play with the world of objects around them, putting them in their mouths, grabbing them, and throwing them. In doing so, they learn the weight

and resistance of objects. And yet such playful exploration is circumscribed by watchful parents and other adults, who set limits on acceptable behaviors that vary according to cultural standards. Children also act out roles with each other, mimicking—or so they think—the adults around them. And adults act this way, too, playing roles in their work, shaping their behavior according to what others around them think. In a larger sense, this play involves the action of the human body against physical, mental, and emotional containment—that is, outside control, be it biological, cultural, political, or social. Such play is an expression of autonomy via human energy.

Play is both material and immaterial, imaginative and repetitive. Play always occurs within a social context, even if others are actually manifest only in some well-established social rules. Play also occurs in our often nonserious but sometimes serious expressions of engagement with the world around us. Play can be disruptive and subversive as we push our limits. Play is contextual, appropriative, disruptive, autotelic, creative, and personal; it partakes of the carnivalesque (Sicart 2014). And this makes context especially important to show the other attributes of play.

People do not play when they feel sick or when they grieve or when they grow despondent—they just suffer and endure. People can play when confined, if only to test the limits—either verbal or physical—of such confinement. They make up word games or fantasize and daydream about the stuff from which hopes are manufactured (Bloch 1986, 2000). People may dream of escape from their cells or depressions, temporarily blunting their confinement and pushing back against their containment. Whether it involves the feelings of joy that come from the physical expression of the body in dance and sports or more subtle feelings engendered by the imaginary tragedy in a theater, playing with the elements of motion and language offers new opportunities for novel associations, new ways of seeing the world around us.

Play mediates this dialectical relationship between human containment and self-expression. In it, we seek escape from the boredom of repetition as well as from the fear of unbridled expansion without limit or context—an escape from the terror of the abyss that I am here calling the *containment play expression* (CPE) model. What allows this mediation to occur is the free-flowing engagement of individuals exploring their relationship with a world absent compulsion.

In addition to providing an imaginative method for engaging what is real, play operates as a negotiated relationship between containment and expression. It becomes the manner in which we confront the world, even if we are compelled

to enact the seriousness of work or the somber reality of ritual. Our accomplishments, no matter how great or small, are the outcome of this negotiation. My more generalized model of play allows us to escape the problem of assuming that each type of negotiated action is itself play. No, play is the outcome that we establish through these negotiations between containment and expression. For that reason, even working (when our behaviors are contained with established social rules reinforced via norms) we can engage in these playful moments of expression (Buraway 1982). We can engage in playful expression even when we confine ourselves through the discipline of work at our craft, as a musician does when practicing. So yes, play is transformative and potentially subversive to the established order. However, it can also be repetitive, relaxing, and calming for both oneself and one's social relationships. Think of recreational fishing as an example.

We engage with the real world in diverse ways, different instances calling on us to take specific actions. How, where, and when we interpret these instances and the accomplishments we produce from such interpretations will guide us in negotiating our understanding of containment and expression. Social groups define containment and expression through everyday practices—a habitus, as Bourdieu (1991, 1984) calls it—informed by differing degrees of political, cultural, and economic capital. But Bourdieu does not articulate the active way in which play bridges conflicts within the habitus. Play encourages us to think of change or of things turning out differently than they routinely do; it is a rogue element in a theoretical stasis. As a mediated outcome, a created relationship between containment and expression, play forms the necessary action required to discover the socially acceptable boundaries for human action in any given situation, but it also helps simply to find that boundary from which we reaffirm our life energies. We can easily understand—as George H. Mead, Jean Piaget, and others have demonstrated—that play is essential to child development, but we find it more difficult to accept that it is also essential to ourselves as adults (Brown 2010).

What for one social group considers containment may not be defined the same way by another social group. Creative expression for one individual, or group, may seem a confinement or containment—or a violation of moral order—for another. Hence, the mediating role of play as a negotiated activity always occurs in the context of a struggle between differing definitions of containment and self-expression. Therefore, the activity of play essentially provides the means for the human interpretation of the actions of others.

Play can also be understood as an accomplishment. It remains a purposive activity—even if play does not contribute to capital accumulation or even personal advancement, it still comes from the balance between containment and expression in the world. It serves as the glue that holds together our understandings and allows us to separate fantasy from reality.

Phenomenologically, our working self exists in a dialectical social relationship with our “partial self” (Chee, Vieta, and Smith 2006, 161), incorporating our actions through a future-oriented project of accomplishment. That project could occur immediately, come tomorrow, or exist in a far away, much anticipated future. It may have nothing to do with the work at hand or be expected by one’s employer. It could take the form of play. The partial self is not only defined by our inner thoughts or by the fantasies shaped by the social order we occupy, but also by the dialogue between our working selves, our outer world, and our intersubjective understandings. And these intersubjective understandings are generated by our struggle to comprehend containment and expression within our society. Hence, more than ever, we need play. Our world is never private but always intersubjective, a world where who we think we are and the meaning of what we do is in constant dialogue with our external environment—with those around us in social relationships (even if others may be in fact physically absent). I argue that these accomplishments constitute our lived reality along the CPE axis. It reflects for us both what we have done and what we could have done.

We anchor a strong sense of self through the accomplishments we achieve in everyday life. Accomplishments do not need to be complicated. They can be as simple as a joy that comes from walking in a sunny field on a beautiful day or the satisfaction of finishing a project in which one has invested time and energy that leads to a spontaneous dance celebrating the moment. Accomplishments can also be achieved in a game, even in a corporate-created computer game. How we measure the value of an accomplishment tells us a great deal about how we understand the nature of work or labor in contemporary society as well as the degree of importance we place on play activity.

At this point, I might appropriately raise the question of whether play, like work, is purposeful. Under capitalism, we usually consider work (or labor) as directed and purposeful activity, as instrumental action. Should we also think of play this way? I would argue yes and no. Yes, play can be a purposeful activity in the sense that, other than pure reflex actions, all human activities, even wasteful actions, are purposeful. Play can also include the dimension of nonpurposeful expression. Expression can be simply an outcry of one’s own joy, not necessar-

ily one for an end determined by social norms. Of course, how one chooses to express one's joy may also be shaped by learned social norms. We see this, for example, in the struggle between personal and political activity. The personal realm and the political realm place different demands upon us, shaping how we express our being and how we contain our actions, so the question remains, action for what purpose, for what reason? If dancing makes you feel good momentarily, then you have your purpose. Our purposes and their accomplishments are many, not merely products of rationalized work schedules or social routines. Skipping a stone across a lake clearly constitutes an accomplishment. The act has no intrinsic value apart from the aesthetic pleasure of watching the stone take flight and feeling the power of the throw. The accomplishment does not lead to greater capital accumulation. It is a momentary expression of the relationship between our bodies, the stone, the air, and the water.

The problem comes when, under the conditions of hypermodern capitalism, work exists only as purposive action, as labor, but play exists as both goal-oriented, purposive action and as simple, nonpurposive expression (McAllister and Ruggill 2010)—that is, as a form of human expression that gives vent to being in the world. (One can easily think of examples such as spontaneously breaking into a dance simply because one feels good.) Ernst Bloch (1986) in his *The Principle of Hope* discusses this type of expression through an examination of daydreaming and everyday fantasies. We play with our fantasies and dreams, enjoying their endless combinations and possibilities for future purposes however distant they might be. And the fact that such human expression, released by play, mediates these relations of containment and expression accounts for its power because it engages with our future and present potential for being in the world.

Where we fall along the continuum of CPE will be shaped by the social logic we inherit in a given society or community and remain unconscious of using (Castoriadis 1986). This is the logic that we learn socially from our culture about acceptable behavior, thinking, and feeling. Such logic, however, does not exist in a vacuum. It presupposes the everyday life and spaces of the world we inhabit with our bodies—our habitus (Bourdieu 1991)—and our imaginations (Lefebvre 1991). First and foremost, it is embodied, occupying the dimensions of both space and time. For humans, mere material production and consumption (a practice of the ontology of production) are not the principal activities. The principal activities are instead giving symbolic meaning (Castoriadis 1986) to the world, making sense of the world around us in noneconomic terms. We

play with the world we inhabit. Our play then has to negotiate the social logic of production that we have inherited historically, which risks distorting play into pure consumption, rendering a symbolic activity instrumental to generate profit. Such meanings are never value neutral but always intertwine with collective representations of the world, representations that are legitimated by routine practices of physical activity, language, social institutions, and politics. This is the world of the “social imaginary” and the “individual radical imaginary” (Castoriadis 1986). The imaginary, the realm of dreams and fantasies, both collective and as expressed individually in radical imaginations, is a material force to which we respond in our social interactions with others and our built environment. The imaginary includes as much of our social context as it does of our immediate physical surroundings.

Some respond to the imposed containment and confinement of discrimination, separation, and segregation by expressing resistance through social movements (often mediated by play), movements that involve art, music, and other forms of culture in the resistance (Shepard 2011; Kenneth Tucker 2010). Street demonstrations and even riots clearly exhibit these features. Revolts and revolutions are forms of human expression that have at their very core the defiance of a given arrangement of containment and expression and stand for, quite literally, playing in the streets. The elation that comes from street demonstrations and the storming of the barricades constitutes a marker of the transformation of the terms of the CPE model. A new social order is proposed—created if only for a brief moment—offering the view of a different future, a different possibility of accomplishment. The problem arises when these surroundings are organized in a manner that offers containment and self-expression in a market-based system in which ownership of private property confers power over others and social inequalities push individuals and groups into antagonistic class, gender, and race relationships. It is easy in these situations to see that more powerful social groups work hard to contain less powerful ones—to make sure that they know their place—and to create rules of interactions that enforce such containments.

Capitalism and the Problem of Work versus Play

I have proposed a unitary way of looking at human expression and containment, mediated by play. Borrowing from Hegel and Marx, I consider play as the mediated relationship between containment and expression woven into the

objectification of labor in the world, distinct from work and yet deeply connected to our work in the world, our objectified labor, in so far as it speaks to noncoercive relationships in the organization of our species being. Play certainly does not include a marked off area, a “magic circle,” in all instances, but may overlap with behaviors previously considered more serious. Indeed, we are not just *Homo economicus* but also *Homo ludens* as Huizinga rightfully understood. What we have called work and play are merely different facets of the same activity, human activity existing under radically different conditions depending on the socially organized system of production, consumption, and distribution of a given society. That is, humans are not born into a world broken apart and segmented via the labor process and pleasurable consumption—we have to be coerced into that model of existence. When this unitary activity gets broken apart via the introduction of economic productive systems that depend upon exploitation and appropriation to operate—that is, capitalism, free markets, and private property—work becomes separated from play, and self-expression in turn divides between individualized public and private settings.

This split has been obvious since the seventeenth century when both business figures and scholars began separating work from play as if they were two mutually exclusive domains of human activity. Some exceptions included such utopian socialists as Robert Owen and Francois Marie Charles Fourier. Fourier, in particular, believed that labor should and could be transformed into pleasure and play (Marcuse 1955). Karl Marx’s son-in-law, Paul Lafargue (1989), the author of *The Right to be Lazy*, also responded to the degradation of work under the newly expanding capitalist enterprises taking hold in Europe by arguing for expanding “free time.” Free time should be for pleasure and play, not for work. He believed that increased worker production, even if self-managed and owned by the workers, would in itself fail to end worker alienation.

Much of the political left took up the issue at the time only to abandon the idea of idleness, frivolity, or repose in favor of increased production and accumulation, a position not far off from the capitalism they criticized. This position was embraced by French socialists like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, with his concept of mutualism and a strictly gendered division of labor. Work became the rallying cry, work controlled and owned by the workers. Although reducing the workday to eight hours seemed critical to preserve any semblance of life and community for workers, the thought of giving up work altogether and still maintaining security appeared all too utopian at the time. This was quite understandable given the emphasis on developing the resources of society. But,

by de-emphasizing the realm of the symbolic in favor of economic production in the guise of socialist or capitalist modernization and by squeezing the mystery and awe of life into organized religious rituals and ideologies or into the realm of cordoned-off carnivals, festivals, and ritualistic gift giving, free of economic ramifications, these thinkers reduced the rich complexity of everyday social life to a struggle for making money and making things to make money (Weeks 2011). For Jean Baudrillard (1975, 1981) this reduction of the symbolic to purely economic priorities is a common characteristic of both socialist and capitalist societies that depend on rationalized systems of economic production and the rational exchange of goods. But, as David McNalley (2001, 2011) points out, Baudrillard's assumptions are based on a fundamental misreading of Karl Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. For Marx the advent of capitalism meant the elevation of the commodity fetish as the primary form of social relationship in modern societies. The use of goods, their actual use value, which included the symbolic, was subordinated to the primary processes of exchange, exchange value, in the marketplace: everything, every experience and every person had a price. In other words, the systems of work and exchange we have come to understand are based on a conscious rationalization of labor as alienated labor and on the reduction of everyday symbolic activities to instrumental action and consumption. In this context the mediating role of play between contained human existence and human expression is rendered subservient to work, absorbed into consumption, and refashioned as leisure.

The attempt to reintegrate work and play, to integrate the noncommercial symbolic world with the economics of production, briefly emerged in the social movements and counterculture of the 1960s, reflected in part by the works of Herbert Marcuse (1971, 1974), Norman O. Brown (1959, 1990), radical art and architecture movements, and the rise of second-wave feminism. And yet, this brief attempt was itself colonized by capital and rendered inert through an integration into capitalist social institutions and into commercial marketing. Vestiges, of course, remain in such expressive art festivals as The Maker Faire, Burning Man, fan-based productions, and other attempts to integrate play, work, and art, even if they are increasingly viewed as commercial venues.

In the 1980s, Andre Gorz (1985) attempted to move beyond a narrow concern with economic production and the separation of work and play and offered a road map out of the system of alienated labor. His *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work* looked at the rapid rise of technological innovation that we see today automating many processes formally done by hand and providing

a relief from alienated labor—but only if we can escape the market relationships that define our everyday interactions. The issue of work as compelled labor drove the early socialists and Marxists to posit the need to overcome capitalism through the abolishment of private property and the work associated with it in favor of a society that allows the full expression of our humanity, one characterized by the free association of individuals for the collective good instead of the narrow individualized one offered by a focus on consumerism and production for greater profits. And this means the reintegration of the symbolic activities of everyday life with the economic production found in labor.

In a more up-to-date analysis, Erik Olin Wright (2010) offered another way to rethink the possibilities of social change and of moving forward beyond capitalism to a world of real symbolic importance, not just economic production. The assumption that the world we inhabit is unchanging and that the systems of production, consumption, and distribution we have in place are “natural” is both historically incorrect and blinds us to seeing how we can avoid the catastrophe that awaits us. Kathi Weeks (2011), for example, has posed a rethinking of the nature of modern work via feminist theory, especially as it relates to how we valorize our labor at the expense of play and human expression. Her advocacy of an antiwork politics resonates well with modern forms of play existing outside the commodity form, a kind of advocacy often found in radical social movements for progressive change, such as the Autonomous Marxist movements popular in 1980s Italy and the now widespread antiglobalization protests.

The question of the role of work and play has always raised the deeper issue of the nature of our being. For the early Calvinists, work equated with avoiding sin and doing penance on earth for the promise of glory in heaven after death. Religion itself played this role in convincing the populous that avoiding sin through continuous labor offered a pathway to freedom from death in a glorious afterlife. And given the desperate conditions of everyday life back then, such appeals were quite enticing. With the rise of capitalism as a system of production and exchange, work simply became that activity in which one needed to engage to live because our means of subsistence had been appropriated by the owners of property. Today, however, even if we make the assertion that labor is fundamentally about development or about making a full life through greater consumption, we are still left with the possibility of ecological suicide through overproduction and climate change. If we are to avoid this unpleasant fate we must ask what we need as a species not merely to survive but to live. To practice our species being, as Marx called it, in a manner that is respectful of the ecologi-

cal web we inhabit requires the reintegration of play and work, the realm of the symbolic with that of production. And this raises the issue of human expression that calls into question our narrowed definitions of labor as well as our understanding of play as commodified leisure. In modern, market-based societies we work to enjoy “free” time to play—to have experiences and to consume commodities. Is work then counter to play or is it intimately connected to play as human expression? I am going to argue the latter position.

Play or Work or Play and Work

Given the nature of modern human cultural expressions and market-driven economic productions, such a distinction separating play from work cannot be maintained, especially in light of diminishing natural resources, climate change, and worries about a sustainable future. If we accept the materialist understanding of work as that which one has to do to maintain oneself in life, then the criteria of work can no longer be confined to merely survival but will resemble a relationship between play, joyful expression, and the labor of life when such work is not confined or forced. The key lies in eliminating the compulsory nature of work as we have come to define it. We can realize our “species being” when the artificial barrier erected between work and play falls (Robert Tucker 1978), when we move from necessity to freedom. Work and play will then operate together in a mutually beneficial relationship. In today’s societies, however, play is reduced to being the handmaiden of work, an activity dedicated to recharging the worker and to serving as the moral model for self-improvement through consumption.

The fact that this beneficial relationship between work and play is problematic in modern capitalist societies points to the exploitative nature of work under conditions of a coerced existence. When we reduce work to compelled labor, we reduce play to controlled consumption (i.e. leisure, tourism, hobbies). We consider play without direct self-improvement a waste of time, a moral slackening that must be punished by more stringent work requirements. Hence the positive and negative public reactions to the antiwork slogans and behaviors of the social and cultural movements of the 1960s that emphasized being over having and playing over working. We think play must offer either some kind of self-improvement or the type of rest that rehabilitates workers so they can continue doing their jobs—play’s intrinsic value as human expression we reduce to instrumental emotion. Its relationship between containment and expression

becomes effectively colonized. In other words, we consider failure to work a moral failure. We can see this in the separation of the “deserving” from the “undeserving” poor that limits much of our social policy debate about welfare to the question of who deserves public support. For example, we see those who have lost their homes in a natural disaster as deserving, whereas those who exist in utter, dire poverty, brought about by their own “bad” choices we consider undeserving, as so much human waste unworthy of attention—except perhaps a charitable religious or moral one—because they demonstrate through their very existence a lack of productivity. And those who choose play over work we view as slackers, as lazy, and a host of other terms that communicate a moral degradation. To exist outside the labor market is to exist in opposition to alienated labor, to exist outside capitalist-organized productive labor. Fear of survival replaces the joy of expression. And within this context, play seems always suspect because it does not easily lend itself to defined categories or to alliances within a market system, even though we try to establish such categories or make such alliances using terms like leisure and hobbies.

The question remains how to achieve the unity of work and play after it was torn asunder by modern political economy. One can see an answer in embryonic form in the pleasure encountered in everyday fandom, where fans devote incredible amounts of energy to their subjects, engaging a large amount of work and exercising an intense discipline in this form of play. We can also see this hint of intense focus and pleasure in the curious inquiries on a subject made by scientists and artists. The joy of reading and exploring new worlds offers another manifestation of play. Yes, someone has to take out the garbage, but rather than considering it a forced activity, one does it for the pleasure it brings to oneself and one’s partners to have a clean house. Once one learns to read, for example, reading assumes its own pleasure. Discipline and incentives for further action can emerge then not as a punitive reaction to fear of failing to comply, but rather as a self-embodied activity pleasurable in its own right. When the life forces of individuals are embodied in what they do, when they have control and ownership of that process, the pleasure that comes from this integration with nature gives them the energy to treat discipline as a mere step, one among many, to create a greater and pleasing form of play. The labor spent learning rewards the learner many times over, and an integration of noncoerced labor and play releases tremendous energy for human betterment by allowing individuals to expand fully their capabilities without suffering from the worry and stress of social failure. However, when the attempt to integrate play and

work proves artificial and maintains the poverty of our current work relations (Chen 2015; Standing 2014), it merely binds the worker closer to exploitative and oppressive conditions—a situation we see with many entry level workers in the technology sector (Aronowitz and Defazio 1995).

Work and liberated play have moved further and further apart as the changing nature of contemporary capitalist economic relationships engineers attempts to reintegrate work and play to facilitate increased consumption, all while trying to maintain control of the productive intent of this integration. Gamification, or the setting up of jobs with the small, built-in rewards of a video game, seems merely to apply the techniques of measured commodified play to that of increased production or coerced labor. The problem remains concerning the terms of this work-play integration. The deliberate repression of workers during the growth of capitalism has changed with the expansion of consumption, mass culture, and advertising to stimulate needs and thereby maintain the profitability of corporate enterprises. Even this strategic move has not been sufficient to allow capitalism to avoid a periodic crisis of capital accumulation, leaving workers to their own devices and a precarious existence. Play then reasserts itself in commodified spectacles organized by the wealthy and consumed by the rest of us—or in occupations of streets and buildings by a defiant resistance to contemporary forms of oppression. To rethink this relationship requires us to rethink our definition of work as well as of play.

The human drive for a complete self, free of capitalist constraints, I believe, undergirds Marx's idea of species being—what he called freedom, outlined in the third volume of *Capital* as human existence beyond necessity. Our everyday constraints are social, economic, and political and therefore directly connected to our intense desire for social attachment, as John Bowlby (1988) understood. This isolated, individualized self-consumer proves insufficient for maintaining a full sense of humanity and requires attachment to others to understand how we should act in society. To act with nature—not against it—feeds our experience of peace, connection, and liberation. And play is the direct manifestation of this freedom, the liberated spirit of human expression. CPE bridges these gaps created by our everyday struggles.

Just because one can view human expression via play within the context of alienated capital does not mean that such expressions are simply a product of this alienation. Even commodified play has its moments of liberation, its glimpse of freedom from the alienation of everyday life (Braun and Langman 2012). Moreover, such a perspective risks reducing the potential for human liberation

as Marx would have understood it to be pure victimization if we do not consider the forms of resistance as well as adjustments to capital that human expression would entail. Even within the confines of a rationalized corporate system, we can find play-work that does not fit the character of alienated labor (think of hobbies). Play can be an accomplishment without productive intent, or it can be simply a wasteful expense (Bataille 1993; Riley 2010).

Human Expression as Work, Play, Ritual, and Communitas?

The CPE model raises issues of how to define human action via relationships of containment and expression. Drawing on the work of Erving Goffman (1967; 1974), Huizinga (1971), and others, Thomas Henricks divides human expression from human interaction, understanding first and foremost that play is about human expression and social interaction—but such expression and interaction conducted under very specific terms. Although play is always context specific, if we differentiate play from other types of human interactions, we run the risk of maintaining false binaries. Henricks (2011) distinguishes play from ritual, communitas, and work, all oriented along the axis of human expression leading to the construction of the self. As he says, “Play is a distinctive pathway for the construction of self. . . . Play is commitment to the act of transformation and to the forms of self-awareness that arise during this process” (2014, 208). Since play exists within a safe, bounded reality defined by the absence of coercion, players can freely work with the material of play to transform their immediate situation. Too often, however, those in developmental psychology and other disciplines of human improvement reach too far in assuming that play is simply a tool for improving our moral, mental, or physical health—an improvement of the self (play as instrumental action)—without understanding that, although this may be a by-product of play, it is by no means its intent. And to say so is to limit play to what we often think of as socially respectable behavior or politic forms of expression. Thereby, we ignore what some have called impure play (Riley 2010) and the way fantasies like those we find in role-playing games reflect deeper—some might say threatening—social processes (Laycock 2015). I am not convinced that distinguishing play as human expression from work, communitas, or ritual offers a solution to looking at the power of play or the problems of integrating it with work in a liberating fashion. It is for this reason that treating play as a

thing, rather than as a relationship that mediates containment and expression, can trap us into endless binaries that lead to a theoretical thicket. One can find play expressions in these others just as easily, in both purposive and nonpurposive behaviors, as Henricks (2014) admits. By using my CPE model, we can include human expression as play within these other differentiated activities, while also keeping in mind the silly nonpurposive nature of play itself. It is not an either/or situation.

Play Context, Process, and Feeling

The results of the negotiated arrangements between containment and expression, these expressions in the world, are accomplishments that have clear historical and political dimensions. In Scott Eberle's concept of play, "Any individual play event is embedded in a social, psychological, and historical matrix" (2014, 230). One can then view games simply as a structured situation that allows goal-directed, purposeful play, play which is negotiated with others. His argument that play definitions have been difficult to develop because we do not have the words that allow us to "render dynamic relationships into language" (231) indicates that what we think of play as an activity is far more diverse than we imagine (See Bateson 1972; Caillios 1961; Sutton-Smith 1997; Piaget 1962). Thinking of play as a set of accomplished encounters driven by emotions lends itself to a dynamic process that has social and individual implications. And games, therefore, provide—through a set of rules and structured instances—the set of events and encounters that can evoke emotions in the participants. To quote Eberle, "Play is an ancient, voluntary, 'emergent' process driven by pleasure that yet strengthens our muscles, instructs our social skills, tempers and deepens our positive emotions, and enables a state of balance that leaves us poised to play some more" (2014, 231). What I have found useful in Eberle's analysis of play is the distinction he makes between play and nonplay activity—a distinction characterized by varying emotional states and less by particular social arrangements. Clearly, both work and play accomplishments generate particular emotional states and particular feelings under given conditions. As I have indicated, we should not assume here that nonplay activity can be described simply by the term "work," because these emotional states can be evoked through a wide variety of social and cultural or political arrangements. If work and play are intimately connected, as I am suggesting, then clearly play versus nonplay activity can make everyday labor seem a depressing bore or offer an opportunity to savor the simplicity of

action. If play is indeed, an imaginative method for engaging the real, then the evoking of emotions through our accomplishments becomes one of the ways in which we learn to establish boundaries between our fantasies and our realities.

This opens up the space for understanding how human expression and emotions can exist in quite a variety of social situations in their complexity, which requires their interpretation by others for emotions to be treated in a manner considered appropriate by participants in the interaction. For Eberle six basic emotional processes work in play: anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise. Without reproducing his complete argument, the manner in which such emotions are organized as a play process range across a spectrum. If we divide it arbitrarily into nonplay versus play processes, then it might look something like this: On one end of the spectrum would be the nonplay effects of indifference, heedlessness, and abstraction countered by the more central play elements of understanding, strength, and poise. On the other end of the spectrum, nonplay would look like excess, shock or terror, and obsessive negative feelings that counter pleasure, surprise, and anticipation respectively.

Given the spectrum of emotional differences that Eberle outlines, we need to examine the situations, encounters, or events that precipitate these feelings. This also includes looking at the particular accomplishments that when performed enable these feelings. In the last instance what separates play from nonplay are our emotional responses to another or to a situation that involves another, even if they are absent (we can imagine another easily enough).

The fact that play involves negotiating and interpreting everyday environments, our context, whether contained in a game or not, means that play as a negotiation between containment and expression is fundamental not just for inducing pleasure but for establishing the boundaries to what we consider real versus what we tag imaginary. Both work and play can ground us in the moment, can make life meaningful—if only temporarily.

Seeking the Bigger Picture in the Small

Computer gaming and negotiated play

Applying this theoretical model to the world of computer gaming, in particular the simulated worlds of MMORPGs, we witness how people who play online—often with strangers, but also with friends—have to engage in a complex set of maneuvers to assess someone else's intention within the game. The emotional

work of presenting oneself intersects with the play of self-expression. T. L. Taylor (2009, 2012), Nardi (2010), Boelstroff (2010), Pierce (2011) and many others have demonstrated that such strict boundaries between play and work collapse in the productive fun labor of video games—however commercialized they may be. Such computer mediated play eliminates the physical presence that we often depend upon to assess another's intentions, reducing present behavior to written text and actual behavior with game objects. Within computer games, one's performance becomes the basis for judging trustworthiness. A player who is perceived as "taking too much" from another is shunned, but helping others may be rewarded by other players. What this means will depend upon the specific context of the computer games program. The boundary of these play performances is a product of the real-time, negotiated relationship between self-expression and self-containment—expressed in the interpreted social boundaries of digital play and demarcated by the reactions of other players' reactions, a reaffirmation of the CPE model. These negotiated relationships stand as an accomplishment. In other words, understanding the difference between nonplay and play behavior requires a social negotiation between one's intimate desires and the social context, which always has to be interpreted. How do you know when someone is playing or not? Play is a constantly moving concept built in part on the negotiation of individuals with their environments—and how in some environments of confinement or containment play may be squelched through fear and depression, just as it may be restricted in a perceived excessive expansion of the self without limits. One person's playful process may offend another and be met with a mediating chat of Laughing Out Loud (LOL) to diffuse the differences in understanding. Finding the right balance between these extremes resembles the goal of much of our everyday lives—working toward an order that allows expression without dissolution. One can view play activity then as a simple method for determining what is real and what is not, what is fantasy and what is that which we are compelled to obey.

Playing a computer game is in large part predicated upon performance mastery. A player has to know the keys to press at the right time to succeed. For play expression to operate, social boundaries have to be developed to differentiate what is play from what is not play. Social boundaries are set by other players and by companies that construct the software with defined rules and limitations on human action within the scope of the game. Clearly, software developers create simulated worlds with preexisting rules that players can only ignore at their virtual peril. But, within these preexisting game rules, there exist social rules

that emerge out of players playing together for common ends. This leads to three points. First, social boundaries are often unwritten and unspoken—tacit rules of interaction often thought of as game decorum. And decorum has rules that, if violated, produce emotional tension, which then must be negotiated by the players involved. Second, aside from navigating unwritten rules of decorum, players also experience pleasure in working through the software challenges of the game in the process of incremental rewards combined with narrative (although often a spatial one). But, incremental rewards from pursuing game quests fade fast after one masters the developer's intent. Hence, the social component of talking with other players, chats, and working with guild members adds interest to what otherwise might be a boring slog through a repetitive set of dungeon rewards, quests, and raid maps. And third, to understand decorum rules means to rely on feedback from discourse (chats, forums) that is contextual.

Computer game players respond to their understandings about virtual environments as well as to the perceived intentions of other players at the same time. For example, examining the discourse of game players as well as their virtual interactions, their microactions with each other, within such bounded play areas as “dungeon runs,” reveals patterns of social decorum and rapport that work to facilitate the accomplishment of group goals, blunt ruptures of respect, and assuage performance competence. Such patterns can also reveal what happens when social interaction meanings are not shared, conflict ensues, and strategies are used to repair the situation. Rather than existing in a “magic circle” outside of the social order, virtual environments that contain games, in fact, will more often than not reproduce the everyday social order through the use of shared meanings that players bring to the setting. Because the networks of meaning we rely upon in everyday life give coherence to our understandings of the world, it is not surprising that these networks appear when game players who do not know each other—and even those who do—bring with them their own views about the actions of other players. Hence, the need for constant negotiation to establish what players consider harmful talk or action and what they find said or done merely for dramatic effect, which can be dismissed with a simple chat. Playing a game is not simply about accomplishing a set of goals but also about constant negotiations over the intent and meaning of other players' actions.

Understanding the meanings players bring to their interactions requires a careful look at how game players talk to each other, come to decisions about the actions they take as a group, and decide which individuals they will tolerate to accomplish a group's goals and how much will they tolerate when differences

in discourse and behavior stray too far from what they perceive as fun. Since the world of virtual play consists of those players you know and those you do not, the pursuit of a common understanding or standard of meaning remains a constant struggle. A well-played game, as Bernard De Koven (2013) points out, is a dynamic struggle: “It is a balancing act. It is a dialog—a play between. On the one hand there is silliness, on the other seriousness. On this side confusion, on this clarity. Here delight, here despair. It is neither work nor play, purpose nor purposelessness that satisfies us. It is the dance between” (141).

The meanings of interactions shift and change from group to group. Players, therefore, engage in a form of routinization, deploying language and behaviors that other group members are understood to acknowledge. In two simple examples, you might say thank-you after running with a group of strangers through a set of game quests, or you might say hello to people you do not know upon entering a virtual dungeon. The social practices of game players in their virtual environments reveal the complexity of necessary negotiations. An attempt to “fix” the social meanings of game player behavior can be found in commentaries on game-blogging sites about good-player behavior, competent-player performance, and the social practices repeated over and over again in the same set of dungeons or quests. Repetition and familiarity of these interactions, combined with the knowledge of the mechanics of an avatar and its potential interactions with the software, create a social practice that helps normalize a specific set of player behaviors. When a player deviates from these behaviors, policing responses can stigmatize that player, insulting him or her with the label of a new player, a “newbie,” or worse, kicking the player from the group he or she has chosen to join.

We must understand that the imaginary configurations of simulated play environments constructed by entertainment companies are themselves prefigured by the larger society in themes as diverse as medieval settings, frontier outposts, or postapocalyptic landscapes. The logic of capital accumulation looms large in many of the reward structures for commercial computer games. And it is within these environments that players will enact their own understandings of what these environments mean to them, carrying them into their interactions with other players. In extreme cases, we see this in the development of game servers specifically devoted to players who wish to engage in role-playing fantasy behavior, both in language and in behavior through their avatars. Social fantasies of race and gender may be deployed in game imagery, such as distinctions created between factions in MMORPGs likes *World of Warcraft* or the

class imagery in other imagined worlds (Embrick, Wright, and Lukacs 2012; Peck, Ketchum, and Embick 2011; see also Wright, Embick, and Lukacs 2010). These fantasies do not exist in a vacuum but are created by artists at software companies operating on marketable themes with which consumers will identify and to which they will respond. The point is, that the ensembles of symbols, partial knowledge (such as detailed game statistics or an understanding of game mechanics), and the arrangements of virtual environments, the everyday spaces of their production at software companies, and the everyday living environments of their players all can illuminate the social imaginary at work (Castoriadis 1986). When the social imaginary reveals itself in the constructed binaries of player talk, such as performance talk that reflects distinctions between a good player and a bad player, what we are witnessing is a logic of play contextualized by the game mechanics involved in the software (how one can actually manipulate his or her avatar), which itself presupposes a set of normative assumptions about how a game arena with a virtual environment should be constructed. Technology is not a neutral arbiter but is deeply involved in privileging some types of interactions over others as Andrew Feenberg (1999) points out in his analysis of technology and democracy. Indeed, Bonnie Nardi, (2010) makes this very point in looking at how the software in the computer game *World of Warcraft* affects the way players both understand the game and themselves. The logic of identity, which homogenizes differences between game players, is both attractive (one can perform as a “tank,” taking damage for the group, say, or a “healer,” helping others; all such roles must be performed competently and must be coordinated to allow for group conformity and ease of goal accomplishment) and unattractive (because it can lock players into rigid sets of behaviors and understandings, such as having set schedules for “raids,” orienting a player’s everyday life around such raids, which results in the social stigma that comes when a player does not cooperate with the group demands).

Conclusions

I began by discussing the fluid nature of play as being in the world and then proposed my own model—the containment play expression (CPE) model—as a way of thinking through the dynamic aspects of play as a relationship instead of as a thing or a static process. When we understand that play produces accomplishments that can be productive or not and that society works hard to erect magic

circles around any activity not immediately connected to capital accumulation, the issue of work arises. I then dissected the struggle between seeing work and play as separate, on the one hand, but also as closely connected, on the other. The debates we often conduct around the distinction between work and play are debates that have at their source the social context of our contemporary capitalism built on exploitative social relations. I discussed the brief history of the struggle for freedom from necessity with regard to the debates about work and how they were based on a productivism that relies on a reductive notion of symbolic exchange and play in general. When we considered play as relational, negotiated through the CPE model, as a human activity connected to purposeful and nonpurposeful accomplishments, we moved from play as encounter to play as process. Play, as mentioned, might be purposeful and productive or purposeless and nonproductive, but never meaningless. We moved from play as encounter, to play as process, looking at the emotions produced by different orientations to play and nonplay activity. From there I explored the nature of both work and play focusing on a subset of modern play—video game players and their pleasures. My notions of play seem reflected in how video game players navigate the emotional landscapes of their simulated worlds through their responses to others. I hold that this example can be generalized, raising the question of just how much work is play and how much play is really work.

Clearly, play as a mediated human activity will continue to suffer under contemporary capitalism, which reduces the world around us to one of production and strips most of humanity of its ability to enjoy freedom by confining existence to the realm of necessity. I am under no illusion that the healing of the created division between work and play can be solved under our current social, economic, and political conditions. That will take a revolution. If we do not change the rules of the game, all human and animal life will continue to suffer, as will our ability to express fully our humanity through play.

REFERENCES

- Aronowitz, Stanley and William DeFazio. 1995. *The Jobless Future: Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work*.
- Bataille, Georges. (1976) 1993. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, Vols. II and III. Translated by Robert Hurley.
- Bateson, Gregory. 1972 *Steps to An Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*.

- Baudrillard, Jean. 1975. *The Mirror of Production*.
———. 1981. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.
- Bloch, Ernst. 1986. *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols.
———. 2000. *The Spirit of Utopia*. Translated by Anthony A. Nassar.
- Boellstroff, Thomas. 2010. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.
———. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*.
- Bowlby, John. 1988. *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*.
- Braun, Jerome, and Lauren Langman, eds. 2012. *Alienation and Carnivalization of Society*.
- Brown, Norman O. 1959. *Life Against Death*.
———. 1990. *Love's Body*.
- Brown, Stuart. 2010. *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*.
- Burawoy, Michael. 1982. *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*.
- Caillois, Roger. 1961. *Man, Play, and Games*. Translated by Meyer Barash.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1987. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey.
- Chee, Florence, Marcelo Vieta, and Richard Smith. 2006. "Online Gaming and the Interactional Self: Identity Interplay in Situated Practice." In *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity, and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler, 154–74.
- Chen, Victor Tan. 2015. *Cut Loose: Jobless and Hopeless in an Unfair Economy*.
- DeKoven, Bernie. 2013. *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy*.
- Eberle, Scott G. 2014. "The Elements of Play: Toward a Philosophy and a Definition of Play." *American Journal of Play* 6:214–33.
- Embrick, David G., J. Talmadge Wright, and András Lukács, eds. 2012. *Social Exclusion, Power, and Video Game Play: New Research in Digital Media and Technology*.
- Feenberg, Andrew. 1995. "Subversive Rationalization: Technology, Power, and Democracy." In *Technology and the Politics of Knowledge*, edited by Andrew Feenberg and Alastair Hannay, 3–22.
- Goffman, Erving. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*.
———. 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*.
- Gorz, Andre. 1985. *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work*.
- Henricks, Thomas S. 2011. "Play as a Pathway of Behavior." *American Journal of Play* 4:225–53.
———. 2014. "Play as Self-Realization: Toward a General Theory of Play." *American Journal of Play* 6:190–213.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1971. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*.
- Lafargue, Paul. 1989. *The Right to be Lazy*. Translated by Charles H. Kerr.

- Laycock, Joseph P. 2015. *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*.
- Marcuse, Herbert. 1974. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*.
 ———. 1971. *An Essay on Liberation*.
- McAllister, Ken S. and Judd Ethan Ruggill. 2010. “Is He ’Avin a Laugh?”: The Importance of Fun to Virtual Play Studies.” In *Utopic Dreams and Apocalyptic Fantasies: Critical Approaches to Researching Video Game Play*, edited by J. Talmadge Wright, David G. Embrick and András Lukács, 43–58.
- McNally, David. 2001. *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor and Liberation*.
 ———. 2011. *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires, and Global Capitalism*.
- Nardi, Bonnie. 2010. *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of “World of Warcraft.”*
- Pearce, Celia. 2011. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds*.
- Peck, B. Mitchell, Paul R. Ketchum, and David G. Embrick. 2011. “Racism and Sexism in the Gaming World: Reinforcing or Changing Stereotypes in Computer Games?” *Journal of Media and Communication Studies* 3:212–20.
- Piaget, Jean. 1962. *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood*.
- Riley, Alexander. 2010. *Impure Play: Sacredness, Transgression, and the Tragic in Popular Culture*.
- Shepard, Benjamin. 2011. *Play, Creativity, and Social Movements: If I Can’t Dance, It’s Not My Revolution*.
- Sicart, Miguel. 2014. *Play Matters*.
- Standing, Guy. 2014. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian. 1997. *The Ambiguity of Play*.
- Taylor, T. L. 2006. *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*.
- Tucker, Jr., Kenneth H. 2010. *Workers of the World, Enjoy!: Aesthetic Politics from Revolutionary Syndicalism to the Global Justice Movement*.
- Tucker, Robert C, ed. 1978. *The Marx-Engels Reader*.
- Weeks, Kathi. 2011. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*.
- Wright, Erik Olin. 2010. *Envisioning Real Utopias*.
- Wright, J. Talmadge, David G. Embrick, and András Lukács, eds. 2010. *Utopic Dreams and Apocalyptic Fantasies: Critical Approaches to Researching Video Game Play*.