Just Fun and Games? A sociological consideration of fun in video games.

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Abstract

The concept of 'fun' is widely used within the game design and game studies literature, and frequently highlighted as a key component of good games design, as well as a key factor in why people play games. However, it is a term rarely unpacked, and fun in video games remains relatively under researched, certainly in comparison to other associated terms such as 'play'. This paper therefore provides a much-needed sociological exploration of a term at the centre of games design and studies, and moreover, argues, that doing so allows us to explore a range of important and related topics, such as the changing relationship between work and leisure and the blurring of fun and no-fun boundaries, as well as enabling us to delineate between often interchangeably used terms, such as happiness, enjoyment, and pleasure.

Key words: fun, play, happiness, enjoyment, pleasure, gamification, no-fun, distraction

In an article in *The New York Times* von Ehren (2020 para.#1) posed the question 'why do people love games?'. Two sentences later he provides the simple answer that 'they're fun!'. The idea that people play games (of all kinds) primarily because they are fun, seems an almost universally accepted wisdom. However, unlike many other concepts, such as 'play' and 'games', 'fun' seems comparatively under-researched — certainly from a sociological perspective. This is quite surprising when any cursory glance at the literature on game design would seem to suggest that fun appears quite central to making and understanding video games. For example, Koster (2004) in his book *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* argues that understanding what makes games fun is central to good game design. Similarly, Kramarzewski and Nucci (2018: 36) encourage game designers to think about 'what makes them [games] fun for their intended audience', while Schell (2008: 27) writes that 'fun is desirable in nearly every game'.

Of course, it would be a misrepresentation to suggest that all of those writing on game design are using the term fun uncritically, or that this is the only factor considered when designing games. As we shall explore later, games can (and often do) evoke a range of

different emotions in gamers — and moreover, that many designers recognise that fun is a complex idea, and not even necessarily the best term to understand why and how games work.

However, while game designers often acknowledge that fun is a problematic term, most still seem to use it quite liberally. Of course, that is not necessarily a criticism of this body of work, for it is not the aim of most game designers to theorise and unpack concepts. However, it appears that not many game studies scholars have attempted to critically think about the nature of fun in video games either.

There are, some notable exceptions, which include, Blythe and Hassenzahl (2004), Davis and Carini (2005), Robins (2008), Skalski *et al.* (2011), McLaughlin *et al.* (2012), Sharp and Thomas (2013), Ruberg (2015), and Rogers *et al.* (2017). This body of work makes important contribution to our understanding of fun in games, and it is not our intention to set up straw targets; however, there is still a good deal of work that needs to be done here. This is because, a critical discussion of fun in video games does at least three things. First, fun provides a useful analytical tool for exploring a wide range of areas associated with playing video games. Second, to date there has not been a full (sociological) exploration of the contemporary nature of fun in video games, and specifically, in the context of neoliberalism. This leads to three, that we would suggest that a more critical reflection on fun could lead to better and more inclusive game design.

In many ways, what we present here parallels Soderman's (2021) discussion of 'flow'. Flow is a concept first introduced by Csikszentmihalyi in the early 1970s to describe the immersion people feel when deeply engrossed in an activity (see, Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Csikszentmihalyi initially saw flow as something that happens during play; however, it is a concept that has been subsequently applied to many areas of social life, such as work and education.

Soderman argues (and we would suggest, similar to, fun) that the concept of flow is ubiquitous in video game design and studies. Flow is something that game designers often seek to tap into to increase the popularity of their games, while game scholars utilise this as a tool to understand why and how people play video games. However, Soderman argues (and, again, similar to fun) that flow is a concept often used quite uncritically by game scholars, but that this idea presents an opportunity to critically analyse video games, their design, and popularity.

We will revisit flow later, but for now, it is useful to understand our purpose and trajectory in this paper as similar to that of Soderman, in that we take a concept at the core of game design and studies (in our case, fun) and seek to critically unpack this, and then use this as a tool to explore a range of issues relating to the consumption of video games. However, while we would suggest that the study of flow is important, we argue that fun is more useful for doing this, for three key reasons.

First, fun is *more* ubiquitous than flow. Fun is a concept used much more widely than flow in the game design and studies literature. Second, fun is a more complex and multifaceted term. Defining flow, though not necessarily easy, is much simpler than fun. Therefore, unpacking the meaning of fun allows us to explore a much wider range of topics and issues. Third, Soderman acknowledged that not all games involve flow, and even for those that do, gamers will not be in a flow state all of the time. Similarly (as we will discuss later) we recognise that not all games are fun, and certainly not all of the time. But, while this is a limit of flow, it is a strength of using fun, because the flip side of the coin, 'no-fun', as we (following Ruberg, 2015) argue, equally allows us to explore other aspects of game design and gamer experiences, such as emotions like loss, failure, and letting go.

A further value of this paper, is that an exploration of fun in video games potentially offers vital insights for game designers in several key areas. First, that a greater understanding of fun can reveal what engages players, potentially guiding the creation of more captivating experiences. Second, recognising that games can encompass a wide range of emotions, including those not traditionally associated with fun, could encourage the design of more nuanced game experiences. Third, insights into how fun varies across cultures could help designers make games with wider appeal, and fourth, that a critical look at fun encourages designers to challenge conventional design norms, leading to innovative gameplay and narratives. Fifth, that understanding fun from a sociological perspective allows designers to consider the broader impacts of their games, potentially promoting more ethical design practices, and finally, acknowledging that fun is experienced differently encourages the development of games that are accessible and enjoyable for diverse audiences. These insights could therefore help create a gaming culture that is more inclusive, emotionally engaging, and reflective of a broarder range of societal values.

Going forward then, this paper first explores three key considerations of fun in order to lay the foundation for the rest of our discussion. Following this, we consider the gamification of work, and the argument that what we have seen developing in recent years is an increased insecurity and flexibility in work, which people are expected to see, and outwardly display, as fun. However, the gamification literature often views this in isolation, and as a one-way process. The far less considered, is how video games similarly reflects work, and what we are seeing is not simply gamification, but rather a broader blurring of the work/leisure and fun/no-fun boundaries. This paper therefore considers this blurring within the wider context of neoliberalism, while, finally, we turn to the arguments of Ruberg (2015) and the importance of 'no-fun'.

Theorising Fun

We are of course not the first to theorise the meaning and importance of fun, and in particular, there are three key texts we wish to focus on here in more detail. These are, Sharp and Thomas (2013), Fincham (2016), and Fine and Corte (2017).

Fun as Play

Sharp and Thomas (2013) offer an introduction and synthesis of several existing discussions of fun, and drawing on these, set out their own theorisation. For Sharp and Thomas fun has three key features. First, is its 'set-outsideness'. Here, they clearly link fun to the literature on play, arguing that 'when we enter a play experience, we set aside certain expectations of utility, efficiency, and expediency' (Sharp and Thomas, 2013: 6).

This then links to Sharp and Thomas' second key point, which is that fun takes place within 'ludic forms', which have their own set of rules. As Goffman (1972) argues, when we enter into play, we accept, what he refers to as, the 'rules of irrelevance' — where for the duration of a game players are willing to put aside, certain social and cultural concerns.

This leads to Sharp and Thomas' third point, that fun involves ambiguity. Again, here Sharp and Thomas link their discussion to the literature of play and suggest that what happens within a playful situation is, to use Juul's (2005) term, 'half-real'. For example, they draw on Bateson's (2000) example of a 'bite that is not a bite' — where in a playful situation a harmless nip is used in place of, and to denote, a more aggressive bite.

Hence, Sharp and Thomas associate fun closely with, if not seeing it the same as, play, and we would agree that there are certainly similarities between play and fun. For example, Fincham (2016) suggests that both fun and play are often compartmentalised in certain times and places, such as something will be fun or playful, for a while, and then stops. However, as Fincham continues, fun and play are not necessarily the same thing, as you can play, and not have fun — a point we will explore in more detail later.

Furthermore, though Sharp and Thomas do draw on the work of several sociologists and do recognise that play (and fun) are not a complete break from the wider social order, their main focus is on the playful experience. Hence, to understand the wider social context we need to look elsewhere, and in particular, to the work of sociologists, such as Fincham (2016) and Fine and Corte (2017).

The Sociology of Fun

Fincham (2016) alerts us to the contextual nature of fun, and that it is important to recognise that our ideas of fun are historically and culturally specific. Though, ideas of fun have probably always existed, our contemporary understanding of the concept is closely linked to consumerism and develops a particular form and nature in the post-war period. Before this, leisure was often linked to more instrumental ends, where leisure (and in particular, sport) was typically seen as a means to condition the body and soul (Bailey, 2014). To be simply be having fun, certainly for the working classes, was deemed frivolous, if not, downright dangerous. For example, Huizinga (1936: 170) warned against the 'contamination' of the seriousness of play by 'pluerilism', which he saw as a 'bastardization of culture' (Janssen, 2013). However, in more contemporary times, it is not just the desire to have fun, but to be (publicly) seen to be having fun, which becomes particularly important.

To be *seen* to be having fun, such as having interesting hobbies or taking frequent foreign holidays, is often associated with certain levels of occupational and financial success. This then links to a second point made by Fincham, that fun is associated with social power relations. For Podilchak (1991) fun can only truly be had once power relations are resolved or at least temporarily negated. Fincham disagrees, as he suggests that fun can also be had by playing with power, such as, by challenging hierarchies or transgressing social boundaries. However, it is still important to recognise that social power relations

can, and frequently do, shape our understanding of fun. As Ruberg (2015: 112) argues, 'fun is cultural, structural, gendered, and commonly hegemonic'.

Closely linked to this is a third point, that of age. It is evident that fun and play are both ideas keenly associated with childhood. Fun and play are often linked with ideas of freedom and unproductivity — things we normally have more opportunity for during childhood. Adulthood is more commonly associated with responsibility, such as to family and work, and tends to provide less opportunity for frivolity. However, it has been argued that this is changing.

In particular, authors, such as Barber (2007) and Raymen and Smith (2017), argue that we are seeing an increasing infantilisation of culture. As Barber (2007: 7) argues 'consumer capitalism [is] seeking to encourage adult regression, hoping to rekindle in grown-ups the tastes and habits of children so that they can sell globally... consumer goods'. Fun then provides an escape from the stresses of everyday life, as people happily regress to simpler childish activities and times, where they had less responsibility, less worries. It is then into this landscape that video games neatly fit, as a distraction once firmly aimed at children, but now providing a legitimate space where adults can seek to escape responsibility and have fun.

This then leads to Fincham's (2016) fourth point, that fun depends upon its social context. Certainly, in adult life there are specific times and places where we are allowed to have fun. This might include participating in a sport, being on holiday, or playing a video game. These are moments carved out of our daily schedule, to relax, engage in leisure, and have fun. However, what specifically makes these 'fun', Fine and Corte (2017) argue, is the presence of others.

Fun with Others

For Fine and Corte (2017), fun is something that happens with others — fun is communal. They suggest that fun is a 'cluster concept' that is often used interchangeably with other similar terms, such as play, pleasure, enjoyment, and happiness (to name but a few). This makes isolating and analysing fun difficult. However, Fine and Corte seek to draw a distinction between these terms, and in particular the difference between fun and pleasure. Fine and Corte describe pleasure as personal positive feelings, while fun is best understood as something that happens in social groups. For them, fun 'extends beyond

mere satisfaction... It is a *collective project*, embedded in social relations' (Fine and Corte, 2017: 67, emphasis in original). Too often, they argue, studies ignore the structuring and coordinating role of collective fun, focusing instead on individual pleasures.

Pleasure is a concept that has been discussed since antiquity (Bostock, 1988). Consequently, there a sizable literature on this topic that we do not have the space to discuss here. Certainly, it is a concept used quite widely in the psychology of video games, such as by Alloway and Gilbert (2005) and Gee (2005), to name just two; however, few of these studies seek to define pleasure, and most authors seem to use this interchangeably with words like fun and enjoyment. There are some exceptions, such as Gros *et al.* (2020: 2) who define pleasure as 'a transient emotional state resulting from the satisfaction of a desire'. However, for Fine and Corte (2017: 67) the key distinction is that 'pleasure is personal, an experience of individual actors, while fun is social'. Hence, we can see pleasure as a short lived and individual emotional experience.

Fine and Corte suggest fun is one way that social groups are formed and maintained. For example, they use Roy's (1959) discussion of "banana time", where factory workers would counter the monotony of work by fooling around on the job. Certainly, ethnographic research of video gameplay would suggest that playing with others, either in person or online, is for many a major part of the fun of playing video games (for example, Thornham 2011, Law, 2021).

For Fine and Corte (2017) fun acts to cohere participants together and can similarly exclude those who are not part of the fun. In those moments and places, fun creates its own rules, and interactive order, which participants adhere to. Fun can break from normal, daily, routines, but creates new ones, which are shared by, and help hold together, a social group.

Fine and Corte (2017), along with, Sharp and Thomas (2013), and Fincham (2016), therefore, provide a sound theoretical basis, by offering, an overview of the role of fun in play, the sociology of fun, and the social nature of fun. However, neither individually, nor collectively, do they allow us to fully understand the contemporary nature of fun in video games. This is because Fincham's work bears little attention to video games, Sharp and Thomas are less concerned with fun in a wider social context, and Fine and Corte (2017) are quite specific in their focus on collective fun. But again, it is worth highlighting that these are not necessarily failings, but rather that the specific focus of these (and other)

authors still leaves considerable room for exploration. Hence, what we do in this paper is carry this debate forward in a direction that helps us better understand the nature of fun in video games within a wider social context.

The Gamification of Work

Deterding *et al.* (2011: 1) define gamification 'the use of game design elements in non-game contexts to motivate and engage individuals.' However, several writers have suggested that gamification is not just evident in isolated examples, but part of a wider societal trend. In particular, it has been suggested that we are witnessing the rise of a 'gameful world' (Walz and Deterding, 2014), the 'ludic society' (Mäyrä, 2017), or a process of 'video-ludification' (Muriel and Crawford, 2018). As Raessens (2010: 6) argues, in our contemporary society, play 'is not only characteristic of leisure, but also turns up in those domains that once were considered the opposite of play', such as education, politics, and work.

However, as Fuchs *et al.* (2014) suggest, gamification can have at least two meanings. First, gamification can be understood as a longer-term part of the evolution of society (see, Huizinga, 1949). However, a second perspective, is to see gamification as something specifically 'brought forward by marketing gurus and designers' (Fuchs *et al.*, 2014: 8). In this second definition then, gamification can be understood as a tool to obtain specific societal outcomes. For example, Conway (2014: 129) argues, gamification treats users like 'zombies' who are 'urged onwards by a desire for extrinsic rewards'.

However, in order to fully understand gamification, and in particular, the gamification of work, it is important to consider this within a wider social context, and the changing nature of work. Horgan (2021) argues that since the end of the Twentieth Century we have seen the increasing rise of what she terms 'new work'. New work stands in contrast to the old Fordist model that proceeded it, which was characterised by routinised working hours and conditions. The promise of new work is that it offers more flexibility, and freedom of choice, for an increasingly agile workforce. However, at the heart of this evolution is neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is a political rationality that first appeared in the 1940s, but rose to significance from the 1980s onwards, particularly under the Reagan and Thatcher governments of the US and UK respectively. Neoliberalism promotes a free market

rational, a privatisation of public services, and the idea of individual freedom of choice (McGuigan, 2016).

However, this freedom to choose brings with it growing insecurity, removing many of society's traditional safety nets and placing increasing emphasis on individual responsibility. Under neoliberalism, work becomes ever more precarious and insecure. This has impacted on all levels of the occupational scale. For higher paid knowledge economy workers, jobs for life have become increasingly rare. For those at the bottom end of the scale, there has been a rise in zero-hour contracts, and a gig economy, with workers moving from one short term job to the next — or juggling several at once. Horgan (2021: 86) argues that this can be seen as 'a massive transference of risk in society, moving it from the wealthy and powerful…to the poor'. As zero-hours contracts and the gig economy, she continues, 'allow workers, rather than employers, to absorb potential cost of lost work or reduced demand' (2021: 86).

Significantly, Cederström (2018) links this transformation in work to what he refers to a rise of the 'happiness fantasy'. Again, happiness is a concept found in several studies of video games, such as, Hull *et al.* (2013) and Gros *et al.* (2020). But, here again, happiness is typically used as a catch-all term to describe the positive emotions experienced during video gameplay. Gros *et al.* (2020: 2) are an exception, as they define happiness as 'a lasting emotional state of contentment', in contrast to pleasure that they see as more transient. Hence, we can define happiness as something that is more long-term and general, such as an overall contentment with life. Of course, pleasure and fun can contribute to happiness, but one does not necessarily need to be having fun or pleasure to be happy.

Ideas of happiness have existed throughout history; however, Cederström (2018) argues, in the early Twentieth Century we see a new focus on happiness, primarily due to the increasing influence of psychoanalysis. In particular, Cederström (2018) suggests that from the 1960s onwards, with the rise of counterculture, that the happiness fantasy really starts to take hold as a powerful force in society. As, it is in counterculture that we see a growing emphasis on personal freedom and free choice, and the right to pursue our own (individual) happiness. However, this freedom then becomes taken over and re-packaged by neoliberalism. Here, our happiness becomes our responsibility. Neoliberalism sells the idea that we are all on a journey to become who we were meant to be, to be complete, and

be happy (Giddens, 1990). To then, not reach this, to not be happy in our lives, in our jobs, to not be having fun, is an individual failure (Horgan, 2021).

It is also in this context that flow fits. Soderman (2021) argues, that for Csikszentmihalyi, flow was a means of balancing tensions between the individual and collective. When playing, people often submit themselves to social rules, such as the laws governing the game of football, but in doing so can at times enter a flow state, which can lead to heightened performance, and longer term, the acquisition of greater skills. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) argues that this then can make play (and similarly other experiences) more enjoyable (a term we will turn to in a moment), and in turn this can lead to greater individual and societal happiness.

One place we are expected to find happiness, and even have fun, is at work. Of course, being happy and having fun at work is not necessarily a bad, or even a new, thing. As Fincham (2016) suggests, though work is not typically associated with fun, work can contain within it, moments of fun. However, towards the end of the Twentieth Century we have started to see a transformation of the workplace, which has seen ideas of (organised) fun imposed from the top down, rather than spontaneously rising-up from workers themselves. Companies such as Innocent, Ben and Jerry's, and in particular tech companies, like Google and Yahoo (to name but a few), have since the 1990s promoted themselves as fun places to work — such as by having swings, slides, chillout pods, and game consoles in their offices (Horgan, 2021). However, these steps are not taken out of concerns for the welfare of workers, but more the assumed link between happiness and productivity (Fincham, 2016).

Horgan (2012) however, makes a valid point, when she argues that it is important not to overemphasise the rise of fun at work. It is all too easy to cherry-pick a few companies that have sought to make their workplace more fun, but for most people, most of the time, work is (still) not fun. However, increasingly workers are still expected to outwardly appear to be having fun, or at the very least, be happy. This is two-fold, first, as stated above, in a society of free choice, to not be happy is a personal failing, which few would like to outwardly admit. Second, in a service (and increasingly experience) economy, workers are required to be happy in front of customers, and to engage in the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) of keeping up an outward appearance of being happy to help create a more welcoming experience for customers (Horgan, 2012). As deWinter *et al.*

(2014: 1) argue, fun and play at work then becomes a 'duty' and 'routine' for the workforce.

From this perspective, then, gamification can be understood as part of a broader social transformation of (new) work, driven by neoliberalism. However, a less discussed part of this social transformation is the recognition that this blurring between play and work appears to cut both ways — and that neoliberal forces have not just led to a gamification of work, but similarly, could be seen to be driving a 'jobification' of leisure.

The Jobification of Video Games

Muriel and Crawford (2018) highlight how Weber's (2001) classic work on the Protestant work ethic (first published in 1905) stresses the importance of the differentiation between domestic and work spheres. However, according to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 155), this has changed radically in contemporary society with the rise of a 'new spirit of capitalism', where it now 'becomes difficult to make a distinction between the time of private life and the time of professional life'. As a consequence, time devoted to work and leisure become more and more difficult to distinguish.

For, if we can find happiness and fun in our working lives, why would we want to confine this to just the working day? Our supposed freedom to choose is therefore used by corporations to extend our working hours (Cederström, 2018). Moreover, as Horgan (2021) argues, time not spent on self-improving is wasted time. Hence, we see a jobification of leisure time, where leisure needs to be productive. As deWinter *et al.* (2014: 3) argue, gamification not only 'extends micromanagement to incorporate the practices of leisure time, attempting to make work seem like fun… but also that it opens the potential to force leisure time to become productive'. For those at the bottom of the social scale, this is often about need, rather than desire — such as the need to have a side hustle. But even for the more economically stable, leisure time is best spent in self-improvement, such as through online courses, self-help books, or serious games, like *Dr Kawashima's Brain Training*.

As contemporary leisure becomes more work-like, a key example, or even driving force, is video games. Of course, we are not the first to consider the jobification of video games, and most notably this was discussed by Yee (2006). In particular, Yee highlights how some video games can involve players undertaking in-game jobs. For example, in *Star Wars Galaxies* where players can have careers, like being a pharmaceutical manufacturer.

Yee suggests this can often be difficult, even at times stressful — just like any other job. Moreover, Yee (2006: 71) hints at a deeper and darker purpose here, that video games also 'condition us to work harder, faster and more effectively'; however, in this short paper these ideas are largely left unexplored.

The idea of video games as training has been explored by several writers, such as, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009). On the one hand, and quite obviously, video game-like technologies are often directly employed to train workers. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009: 71) argue, training simulation are used in a variety of professions 'from city planners to air traffic controllers'. However, they also suggest that video games perform a less obvious form of social training, and it is this that Yee (2006: 71) was maybe hinting at. Here, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009: 28) argue that video games act as a 'means of preparing [gamers for] all kinds of immaterial labor for the digitized workforce'.

In an era of blurred boundaries between work and leisure, as work becomes more game-like, games similarly become more work-like, replicating key aspects of the workplace, such as toil and career progression. In certain video games, like *Star Wars Galaxies*, this is quite obvious; however, in-game labour extends far beyond this. For instance, video games mimic aspects of working life by rewarding progression and achievements through the completion of repetitive tasks. A key example of this is 'grinding'. Grinding can be defined as 'the repetition of certain game sections to obtain some in-game reward' (Andiloro, 2023: 1). Grinding is particularly evident in certain types of games, such as RPGs, like *The Elder Scrolls* series, and turn-based games like the *Final Fantasy* games, but can extend to many other genres, such as, building and sandbox games, like, *SimCity*, to name but a few. In particular, the game journalist MacQuarrie (2018) argues that 'the idea of perpetual growth underpins much of our society', he continues, 'but games seem uniquely committed to it as a medium' (cited in Soderman, 2021: 49). Using the example of the *Civilization* series, MacQuarrie highlights how these, like many other games, are based around neoliberalist ideas of exploration, expansion, and exploitation.

However, what clearly differentiates the game-world from that around it, is that video games give us a greater sense of both control and fairness. As Pedercini (2013: 62) argues, video games are quantified and 'built upon technologies of control and quantification, and are still by and large informed by them'. Video games tend to have clear goals and simple

input and reward structures that are quantified and objective. Gamers understand that their actions will lead to certain outcomes, and when this does not happen this is often due to clearly identifiable reasons, such as the gamer's, or their in-game character's, lack of skill or progression. Kirkpatrick (2013) argues that this is particularly appealing, as video games offer us a clear sense of achievement, reward, and progression, in a modern world where these things are increasingly difficult to attain. Video games then provide us with a distorted, rationalised, version of the world. They offer us an attractive fantasy of a world where effort directly leads to reward, cutting out the unfairness and structural inequality of wider society. Hence, not only do we enjoy (and have fun with) games that replicate work, because working all the time is what we are told will make us happy, but we find fun in games that eradicate the complexities and unfairness of the wider world, that give us a greater sense of control over our destiny, and a sense of achievement when we succeed.

For Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) this is part of the wider and more overarching function of video games, which entails a psychological conditioning of gamers to be more compliant. Hence, it is not necessarily the case that video games teach gamers actual, practical skills, which could be employed in the workforce. But rather that they foster a greater acceptance of the need for constant work, constant goal-chasing, and self-improvement, as well as the acceptance of rules that limit and guide our actions in all that we do. For example, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) suggest that the purpose of war-themed video games is not necessarily to train the next generation of soldiers, but rather make the wider population more comfortable with the idea of constant war. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter are rightly sceptical of simplistic media-effects arguments, such as that violent video games make more aggressive gamers. For them, the power of video games is more ideological, such as normalising the hatred of 'an officially designated enemy, [and] triumph in his death', or, 'at least indifference towards its necessity' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009: 117).

Distraction

In many ways, it is this 'indifference' that might be of most important here. Bown (2015) argues, the real power of video games may be that they offer gamers an enjoyable distraction. Using the example of two popular mobile games, he argues, that 'both Candy Crush and Football Manager Handheld are mobile-phone games that aim to distract us

and to pass our time… leaving us in a constant state of entertainment' (Bown, 2015: 27). Moreover, Fincham (2016: 36) argues that the main aim of video game developers is probably not to make games that are fun at all, but rather ones that are exciting and stimulating — games that grab our attention and distract us from other things — as it is these kinds of games that 'shift units'.

Bown (2015) suggests that there is more to this distraction than selling engaging games. He argues that distraction serves at least two social functions in contemporary society. First, distracting video games take peoples' minds off their work and its poor conditions, providing them with a place to have fun, away from the stresses of other (more important) things. Second, this distraction in turn then, reinforces the seriousness of other areas of social life, such as work — 'allowing us to feel that what we "should" be doing (usually working) is truly "worthwhile"' (Bown, 2015: 29). Moreover, being seen to be distracted and having fun, emphasises to others the importance of the work that you do, and therefore, our need to be distracted from it.

The key term that Bown (2015) utilises in his discussion of video games and distraction is 'enjoyment'. Enjoyment is a concept to that is less used than that of fun (or pleasure or happiness) in the video game literature, but it is employed by some writers such as Bown (2015) and Sweetser and Wyeth (2005). Notably, enjoyment is also a term employed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975). For example, he suggests that flow can make life more enjoyable, by helping people cope with stress and to take control of their lives, which in turn could lead to happier people, and a happier society.

Attempts to differentiate enjoyment from pleasure are more clearly presents in the wider literature of media audiences. For example, here Tamborini *et al.* (2010: 759) suggest that though enjoyment is closely linked to the hedonistic concept of pleasure, they are not the same. For them, pleasure may be a constituent part of enjoyment, but not its equivalent, as they suggest enjoyment also relates to 'the satisfaction of needs' (Tamborini *et al.*, 2010: 760). In particular, Tamborini *et al.* link enjoyment to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, and suggest we enjoy media (including, they suggest, video games) that fulfils certain fundamental needs, such as self-esteem or self-actualisation. Hence, enjoyment (like pleasure) is best understood as an individual experience, but more specifically, one that typically addresses certain needs.

No-Fun

Here we want to return to a point we highlighted towards the start of this paper, which on the surface of it, might appear to challenge our central argument. That is, that video games are not always fun, and that therefore, a focus on fun provides a limited understanding of the gaming experience.

The idea that video games are not always fun is explored most keenly and directly by Ruberg (2015). Ruberg argues that several game studies writers and game designers acknowledge that video games are not always fun. For example, Juul (2013) refers to what he terms the 'paradox of failure', which is that gamers continue playing even though they repeatedly lose. This, Juul suggests, is because they accept failure as part of a necessary inconvenience on their road to success and fun.

However, as Ruberg (2015: 113) argues, 'there is much more to video games than fun'. First, Ruberg (2015) suggests that an emphasis on fun is in part a direct response to the rhetoric that has circulated in the mainstream media for decades, of video games as potentially dangerous. Similarly, it is the call to see video games as 'just fun' that has been central to the discourse of more reactionary gamers, such as those involved in GamerGate (Ruberg, 2015). Second, Ruberg suggests that a focus only on fun in games impoverishes our understanding of the gaming experience, and in particular, ignores those who take pleasure from the non-fun aspects of gaming.

Here, Ruberg (2015: 114) points to the value of Queer Theory, such as Halberstam (2011), which seeks to reject dominant neoliberal values that dictates what should make us 'happy, wealthy, and healthy' and how we should have fun. In particular, Ruberg argues that Queer Theory recognises that people gain pleasure, happiness, and have fun, in different ways. This also highlights the importance of acknowledging unpleasant emotions, as well as more transgressive opportunities. This includes, for example, gamers subverting intended game designs, and having fun, for example, by choosing to repeatedly drive your car into a sand pit in *Mario Kart 8*, as Ruberg suggests they like to do. Hence, what Ruberg (2015) alerts us to, is the need to consider a range of emotions associated with video games, and that feelings of sadness, frustration, and anger (to name but a few) should not be overlooked as simply stepping-stones towards the gamer's ultimate goal of fun — and rather, that these (supposedly negative) emotions are an important, and at times a large part, of the gaming experience.

Conclusion: No More Fun?

Of course, we very much agree with Ruberg's (2015) argument for the need to recognise that video games are not always fun, and that only focusing on fun greatly limits our understating of video games and diverse gaming experiences. Moreover, it is also important to recognise, as Ruberg (2015) argues, that not everyone takes pleasure, or has fun, in the same way. For example, Brock (2017: 172) explores how gamers may find value in the 'emotional turmoil' that failure in video games can provide.

Brock (2017) also argues that video games are not just about control and mastery but can also be about letting go. Employing the critique offered by Mouzelis' (2010) of the 'reflexive modernisation thesis' (for example, Beck *et al*., 1994) Brock suggests that human subjects are not always seeking control, and that sometimes pleasure can be obtained from letting go and giving in. For example, trusting a game to guide you, and take you on a journey. This certainly could explain the pleasure people get from what have been described as 'idle games', such as *adVenture Capitalist*, as discussed by Ruffino (2019), where the game largely plays itself with little or no input from the player. But this is also relates to aspects of many other video games, such as the use of cut scenes, or simply following the paths and breadcrumbs that game designers have carefully laid out for the gamer to follow. As Fizek (2018) argues, there is a need to consider the passivity, and not just the interactivity, of gamers.

We therefore readily admit that video games are not all fun, and that the no-fun aspects of games also need to be taken seriously. And, also, that different people gain different pleasures from gaming, which can sometimes involve seeking to beat or control a game, giving in to the game system, finding delight in failure, or seeking to subvert gaming norms. However, it is still important to recognise that fun remains central to many discussions of video game design and gameplay. Fun is a term used widely, and often without much reflection, in a great deal of the game design and studies literature. Fun also provides a very useful tool for exploring a wide range of important areas and questions in relation to the consumption of video games, and a discussion of fun also allows us to provide analytical boundaries to often interchangeably used terms, such as happiness, pleasure, and enjoyment. Furthermore, a consideration of fun allows us to contextualise gamification, and in particular the gamification of work, within a wider discussion of the blurring boundaries between work and leisure, and when coupled with

its flip side of no-fun, this then allows a better understanding of the contemporary nature and consumption of video games.

In summary then, a sociological consideration of fun in video games provides game designers and scholars with a deeper understanding of player engagement and the broader implications of their work. It is therefore hoped that this discussion could inspire greater innovation, inclusivity, and socially responsibility amongst game design practices, which in turn, could contribute to the enrichment of the gaming landscape.

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