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ORIGINAL PAPER

Redemption Through Play? Exploring the Ethics of Workplace Gamification

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Abstract
Today, it is becoming increasingly common for companies to harness the spirit of play in order to increase worker engagement and improve organizational performance. This paper examines the ethics of play in a business context, focusing specifically on the phenomenon of workplace gamification. While critics highlight ethical problems with gamification, they also advocate for more positive, transformative, and life-affirming modes of organizational play. Gamification is ethical, on this view, when it allows users to reach a state of authentic happiness or *eudaimonia.* The underlying assumption, here, is that the 'magic circle' of play—a sphere that exists entirely for its own sake—should be protected in order to secure meaningfulness at work. However, we argue that this faith in play is misguided because play, even at its most autotelic, is ethically ambivalent; it does not lead inexorably to virtuous work environments, but may in fact have an undesirable impact on those who are playing. Our study thus contributes to research on the 'dark side' of organizational play, a strand of scholarship that questions the idea that play always points toward the good life.

Keywords Ethics · Gamification · Philosophy

Introduction

Today, it is becoming increasingly common for companies to harness the spirit of play in order to increase worker engagement and improve organizational performance (Petelczyc et al., 2018). Notions such as serious play and gamification occupy a prominent place in the pop-practitioner literature (Carroll, 2009; Dignan, 2011; Penenberg, 2015) and have given rise to a range of playful business solutions like office 'play corners,' video game marathons, corporate role-playing games, and virtual reality management games (Celestine & Yeo, 2021; Dymek, 2017). The aim of such interventions is to address a range of work-related problems—stress, fatigue, low morale, and employee turnover—by appealing to the playful side of organizational life (Butler and Spoelstra, forthcoming). More generally, organizational play attempts to infuse work with an intrinsic sense of meaningfulness—a core concern for practitioners and academics alike in the field of business ethics (Lysova, et al., 2023; Michaelson et al., 2014).

In this paper, we examine the ethics of play in a business context, focusing specifically on the phenomenon of gamification. Coined in 2002, the term 'gamification' typically refers to the application of digital game elements to non-game contexts, such as work or marketing (Hamari, 2019). On a basic level, these game elements may include points, badges, and leaderboards (or PBLs); on a more advanced level, they may include other elements drawn from the sphere of video games, like power-ups, loot boxes, avatars, puzzles, and missions. The point of gamification, broadly speaking, is to generate the same sense of purpose and accomplishment we feel when we are playing video games, even though we are engaged in an entirely different task (e.g., doing our job, buying a product) (Mollick & Werbach, 2015; Wünderlich, et al., 2020).

Commentators point out that gamification raises a series of ethical concerns. One strand of research focuses on the ethical dilemmas that arise from the nature of specific game mechanics. For example, gamification raises the potential for deception with the use of data-driven persuasive techniques, which may manipulate users into acting in ways contrary

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to their interests (Thorpe & Roper, 2019, p. 605; see also Martin, 2022). As such, gamification designers are encouraged to build ethical safeguards into their digital systems in order to avoid causing harm to workers or customers (Kim & Werbach, 2016), guided by an industry-wide code of conduct (Kim, 2018; Marczewski, 2017; Zichermann & Linder, 2013). Other commentators argue that gamification design ought to focus less on merely 'avoiding coercion or harm' (Deterding, 2014, p. 321); instead, it ought to strive toward encouraging more positive, transformative, life-affirming modes of organizational play that bring to 'full fruition… our capacities as human beings' (2014, p. 321). Gamification is ethical, on this view, when it allows users to reach a state of authentic happiness or *eudaimonia* (2014, p. 321). From this perspective, instrumental forms of gamification risk undermining the ethical potential of play—that is, its ability to provide a means for living the good life (see also Bateman, 2018; Landers, 2019; Sicart, 2015). The underlying assumption, here, is that the 'magic circle' of play—a sphere that exists entirely for its own sake—should be protected in order to secure meaningfulness at work.

In this paper, we take a different approach to the ethics of organizational play. Instead of restating a belief in the liberating effects of play at work, we want to address the following questions: (1) where does the contemporary faith in play come from and (2) how does this faith conceal the ethical ambivalence of play? We argue that organizational play is typically framed as a way to promote authentic human flourishing in a work context, not only by proponents of gamification but also—paradoxically—by its critics. The mainstream literature promotes gamification as a means to increase engagement and productivity, yet it does so by underscoring the ethical foundation of play as an intrinsically motivating phenomenon. Similarly, while the critical literature highlights the potential for gamification to deceive and exploit users, it valorizes play as a path to true happiness—once it has been purged of instrumentalism and regained its autotelic nature. However, we argue that this faith in play is misguided because play, even at its most autotelic, is fundamentally ambivalent; it does not lead inexorably to virtuous outcomes, but may in fact have an undesirable impact on those who are playing. Our study thus contributes to research on the 'dark side' of organizational play, a strand of scholarship that is 'seldom discussed or studied in the current research on play in the workplace' (Petelczyc et al., 2018, p. 179) precisely because organizational play is typically viewed as force for good, as a meaningful experience in itself.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we provide an overview of the literature on gamification, focusing on the ethical implications of digital play in organizations. In particular, we show that both proponents and critics of gamification arrive at a similar conclusion, namely, that an activity that is performed entirely for its own sake, such as play, has the potential to achieve the highest possible good. We then turn to the philosophical roots of this faith in play, specifically the work of Aristotle in relation to virtue ethics and the work of Hugo Rahner and Romano Guardini in relation to the theology of play. Finally, we highlight the ethical ambivalence of play with two illustrative examples of gamification—Las Vegas casino play and Amazon warehouse play—before reflecting on some of the implications of our analysis for studying the ethics of organizational play.

The Ethics of Workplace Gamification

The concept of 'play' is notoriously difficult to define. Owing to its countless social and cultural forms, play resists straightforward categorization: it can refer to anything from daydreams and dancing to football matches and religious festivals, from dressing up and storytelling to play-fighting and war games (Huizinga, 1955). In this paper, we draw on a more limited notion of play within the 'rhetorics of frivolity' (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 201). Here, play is fundamentally counter-posed to the realm of seriousness, productivity, work, and so on. Play represents an inverted sphere where the normal rules of business are temporarily put on hold, a sphere in which the guiding principle is 'let's pretend.' Of course, play and work may overlap at certain points, but play is always recognized as an interloper, a splash of color in an otherwise monochrome world. Play is a reminder that, even in the most sober of environments, there is an opportunity for lightness and freedom from necessity.

It is striking that play has become an explicit component of work organization over the last few decades. Emerging in the 1990s, the idea of 'serious play' gained traction as a business fad in high-commitment organizations (Roos & Victor, 1999; Schrage, 1999). As the name suggests, serious play implies that play need not be a trivial or time-wasting activity that organizations must exclude from working hours. On the contrary, proponents of serious play claim that purposefully designed playful activities, such as LEGO workshops, simulation games, and puzzle-solving exercises, can spark the imagination of employees and stimulate innovation in work processes and product design (Statler, et al., 2009). The basic idea behind serious play is that organizations will be able to generate a feeling of 'blissful productivity' (McGonigal, 2012, p. 53) by integrating play with work. To this extent, serious play is not a threat to labor discipline but in fact serves as 'a continuation of work by other means' (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2012, p. 84).

Workplace gamification offers a digital twist on serious play by tapping into the rhetoric of video games. In particular, gamification seeks to arouse the same sense of immersion and involvement normally provoked by video

games, albeit transplanted into a business context. This is the lesson we find in practitioner books like *The Gamification Revolution* (Zichermann & Linder, 2013) and *For the Win* (Werbach & Hunter, 2012): gamification has the potential to motivate employees to perform beyond expectations because, like video games, it balances reasonable challenge with hard-won achievement within a rules-based system (see also Burke, 2014; Kumar & Herger, 2013; Suriano, 2017). Gamification emerges from the realization that ordinary work no longer engages employees, a fact borne out by high rates of job disengagement among global workers (Gallup, 2022). The puzzle, for management thinkers, is why workers 'will spend four hours playing *Angry Birds* but won't spend five minutes going through training to learn something new' (Paharia, 2013, p. 21). Video games—whether casual mobile games like *Candy Crush Saga* or online multiplayer games like *World of Warcraft*—have the capacity to engross players in their virtual worlds, whereas paid employment is typically far less motivating and rewarding. By harnessing the power of video games, so the theory goes, organizations will be able to unleash the creative energies of their workforce, making work both more pleasurable and more productive (Rigby, 2015).

Unlike serious games, which absorb participants in a stand-alone game to achieve work objectives, gamification imposes a 'game layer' on organizational life (Deterding et al., 2011; Priebatsch, 2010). In particular, gamification uses game design elements to accomplish a work-related task without fundamentally changing the nature of the task itself (Klock, et al., 2020; Seaborn & Fels, 2015). Gamification is primarily achieved through the design and application of digital tools that determine rules, define goals, provide feedback, and dispense rewards to players, whose progress is tracked on a public leaderboard (Hamari, 2019; Warmelink et al., 2021). For example, the tech company Freshworks offers a digital platform to gamify aspects of customer support that allows telephone helpdesk agents to embark on quests, earn points, level up, and unlock achievements as they go about their daily business (Robson, et al., 2016). Instead of temporarily suspending normal work like serious play, gamification intervenes in daily work over an indefinitely long term, which gives it an 'infinite' character (Beresford, 2020).

Gamification is said to create a separate, shimmering sphere (or 'virtual space') within normal organizational life, like a mirage in the desert. Within this play space, all material relations are temporarily put aside and we become totally 'absorbed' by the game and its mechanics (Robson, et al., 2015, p. 414). In the words of play theorist Johan Huizinga (1955, p. 10), we enter a 'magic circle' that stands in stark contrast to the quotidian reality that lies outside of it (see also Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). The magic circle, of course, does not necessarily refer to a literal or physical place; it may also refer to an interior space, a 'play-mentality' (Gadamer, 2004) or 'lusory attitude' (Suits, 2014) that draws participants into engaging with the task at hand in a new, more enjoyable way. Gamification seeks to establish a magic circle within business by turning otherwise mundane forms of work into joyful play (see Coelho & Abreu, 2023; Marczewski, 2014; Peters, 2022), which may be competitive or collaborative or solo in nature.

But gamification is not only (or even primarily) about 'fun,' understood as meaningless amusement or diversion. The idea of gamification also taps into broader ethical assumptions about play. Advocates of gamification, in spite of their focus on productivity in the workplace, articulate an underlying faith in play as a profoundly meaningful, elevating phenomenon. Put simply, integrating play with work is said to create the conditions for human flourishing.

Consider, for example, the basic elements of intrinsic motivation—autonomy, mastery, and purpose—that pop up in most practitioner books on gamification (e.g., Beresford, 2020: 42; Burke, 2014, p. 19; Chou, 2014 p. 412; Paharia, 2013, p. 24; Werbach & Hunter, 2012, p. 56–57). Deriving from Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory and later popularized by Pink (2009), these elements are found in 'activities that are done for their inherent satisfaction' (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 117), that is, activities that are meaningful in themselves and performed for their own sake. For thinkers like Ryan and Deci, engaging in activities that contain their own intrinsic motivation will allow us to tap into 'the essence of human thriving' (2017, p. 5). The same view is found in the gamification literature:

> [D]on't look at gamification as a covert tool to squeeze more out of customers, employees, or other groups. Look at it as a means to produce authentic happiness and to help people flourish while achieving your goals at the same time (Werbach & Hunter, 2012, p. 68).

The argument, here, is that playful activities are not only useful for achieving organizational objectives; they are also valuable in themselves, a part of the good life. Gamification, in other words, is not just about achieving hard-nosed management objectives; it is also about helping employees 'live happier and more fulfilled lives' (Burke, 2014, p. 162).

Much of the optimism about play derives from the fact that it produces an autotelic experience, captured by Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) idea of 'flow.' People who are in a state of flow are fully absorbed by the activity in which they are engaged, an activity they perceive to be intrinsically meaningful and bearing its own rewards. For Csíkszentmihályi, play is a flow-inducing activity *par excellence* because it is typically an end in itself and not directed toward an external goal. He asks us to think about chess or rock-climbing activities that engross participants entirely and are directed toward nothing except their own accomplishment

(1990, p. 72). Such activities are specifically designed to transport the participant into a 'new reality' (1990, p. 74), a realm in which life becomes 'more rich, intense, and meaningful' (1990, p. 70)—the zone of 'optimal experience' in which nothing matters aside from the task at hand and the enjoyment it brings (1990, p. 67). It is in this zone, Csíkszentmihályi claims, that we will be able to reach a state of true happiness (1990, p. 1–2).

Given the promise of play as an autotelic activity, it is unsurprising that the gamification literature draws extensively on Csíkszentmihályi's concept of flow (Hamari & Koivisto, 2014; Oliveira, et al., 2022; Silic & Lowry, 2020). On this view, play is valued not only for its ability to nudge employees toward heightened levels of engagement but also for its capacity to create a sense of intrinsic meaning and purpose (Hugos, 2012, p. 2; Reeves & Read, 2009, p. 184). Such commentators express a belief in play as an activity that transcends the material world of work and reaches a higher, more moral, level.

But gamification is not universally celebrated. For critics, gamification is a cynical management technique that offers a quick and dirty solution to the perennial organizational problem of low worker engagement (Vesa & Harviainen, 2019). From this perspective, gamification involves the slapdash application of game mechanics in pursuit of bottom-line objectives. This is why video game theorist Ian Bogost (2011) describes gamification as a form of 'exploitationware,' one that is fundamentally opposed to the open worlds and limitless horizons we often find in contemporary video games. For Bogost, gamification is nothing more than a hollow simulation of the kind of immersion and involvement we experience in digital play. Landers (2019) expresses similar sentiments, claiming that gamification uses the seductive language and visual imagery of video games in organizations without, however, implementing actual game design mechanics. In other words, gamification fails to harness the power of play to enrich the inner lives of workers, instead turning employees into docile and obedient 'zombie-players' who serve only company goals (Conway, 2014).

Others go further and characterize gamification as a means to discipline and control workers with game design elements—a new form of 'governmentality' that simultaneously regulates and entertains (Schrape, 2014). For DeWinter et al. (2014), gamification is a digitally enhanced version of scientific management, a kind of 'Taylorism 2.0' that surreptitiously intensifies labor without remunerating workers for their efficiency gains. This is the 'fun side of surveillance' that Albrechtslund and Dubbeld (2005, p. 220) warn us about: a digital game layer that uses data processing technologies to both police and amuse its players. For these critics, gamification is far from a benign organizational intervention meant to liven up otherwise dull working conditions with a rainbow burst of pixels. On the contrary, it is a managerial strategy that seeks to extract data, track user behavior, and optimize key metrics while hiding its true intentions behind a video game smokescreen (O'Donnell, 2014; Vasudevan & Chan, 2022).

It is noteworthy that critics of gamification seek to repurpose organizational play toward more ethical and emancipatory ends. For example, Woodcock and Johnson (2018, p. 543) argue that gamification is responsible for 'supporting and even further developing the economic relations of neoliberal capitalism,' relations that are based on exploitation and alienation. In other words, gamification squeezes out more labor from us while forcing us to enjoy our subjugation. Yet Woodcock and Johnson claim that 'game elements *themselves* are not the problem' and that play—or what they call 'gamification-from-below'—in fact provides an 'opportunity for substantial transformation of our lives' (2017, p. 548; emphasis in original). Play is able to effect such a radical change, Woodcock and Johnson tell us, precisely because of its 'non-instrumentality' and 'pointlessness,' qualities that set it in direct opposition to capitalist production (2017, p. 549). The autotelic nature of play, in other words, ought to be protected in order to ensure 'human well-being' (2017, p. 552).

A similar view is captured in distinction between 'rhetorical gamification' and 'humanistic gamification' (Deterding, 2019; see also Landers, 2019). Rhetorical gamification refers to the superficial use of video game iconography in organizations, grounded in 'operating procedures, objectives, performance indicators, incentive schemes, and internal markets' (Deterding, 2019, p. 132). This mode of gamification is directed toward neo-Taylorist productivity gains, mirroring existing managerial processes (e.g., reward systems, immediate feedback, and KPIs) (2019, p. 133). Humanistic gamification, meanwhile, refers to the human-centered design of playful experiences in organizations, grounded in 'basic psychological needs' (2019, p. 133). The aim of humanistic gamification isn't solely to produce value for the company; the aim is also 'to afford positive, meaningful experiences' to employees (2019, p. 133). Drawing on the tenets of positive psychology, humanistic gamification motivates employee behavior in a decidedly 'ethical' way (Landers, 2019, p. 138). Like Woodcock and Johnson, Deterding and Landers criticize existing forms of gamification yet they never lose faith in the 'transformative potential of play' (Deterding, 2019, p. 133) in corporate contexts.

For such commentators, the problem is not that gamification creates a magic circle where it does not properly belong, that is, in work organizations. Rather, the problem is that the magic circle in organizations has been polluted by external considerations, such as cost savings or performance boosts. For this reason, the magic circle has been evacuated of everything that promises to serve 'true human dignity' (Woockcock and Johnson, 2017, p. 552). What we need,

in Deterding's words (2014, p. 307), is a 'positive vision of gamification' that draws on principles of 'eudaimonic design' to secure 'human flourishing.' It is telling that critics of workplace gamification talk about the redemptive qualities of play in much the same way as TedTalk game evangelists like Jane McGonigal (2012, 2016)—that is, by expressing a faith in its autotelic character and liberating powers.

While the mainstream perspective holds that play can be seamlessly integrated with work in order to achieve autotelic ends, the critical literature argues that gamification represents a corruption of play—and so undermines its eudaimonic nature. Yet despite their differences, both the mainstream and the critical literature on gamification articulate a deep-seated belief in play as a positive force in society and organizations. For both proponents and critics of gamification, true play—or, in Woodcock and Johnson's words, 'true gamification' (2017, p. 552)—is profoundly redemptive; it promises to unleash our human potential and liberate us from unrewarding toil. In its purest form, play always points toward the good life (Sicart, 2014).

In the remainder of the paper, we address the following questions: (1) where does the contemporary faith in play come from and (2) how does this faith conceal the ethical ambivalence of play? As we show in the next section, this faith in play has its roots in the Aristotelian tradition in Western philosophy and theology—a line of thought that provides gamification with its ethical coordinates. In our analysis, we tap into the double meaning of 'faith': a general everyday term (i.e., having trust or confidence in something) and a specific religious concept that indicates a connection between human beings and a higher sphere (i.e., a spiritual belief system). We now turn to the idea of autotelic activity and its relation to the divine, a sphere to which play is said to have privileged access, before outlining why play might in fact represent a 'false messiah' for proponents and critics of gamification alike.

Autotelic Activity and the Good Life

Aristotle was the first Western philosopher (that we know of) to develop the distinction between activities that are valuable for external ends and activities that are valuable in themselves, serving only their own ends. This distinction provides the starting point for a discussion in Aristotle's (1999) *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, all activities are directed toward an end. However, some activities derive their value from contributing to an end that is external to the activity whereas others contain their own reward, that is, an end that is internal to the activity itself (Book I: 1–2). In Aristotle's view, activities that are directed toward their own ends are superior to those that are not, although not all ends that are realized through their associated activity are necessarily complete in themselves. For instance, we may pursue a virtue like honor as an end in itself, but we may also pursue honor because it makes us feel good (Book I: 7; Book X: 7). This leads Aristotle to suggest that a fulfilling life must correspond to the activity that is directed toward its own end, an end which is complete in and of itself. The rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is an attempt to answer the question of what exactly this activity is. The answer Aristotle settles upon is that the activity that is complete in itself is *eudaimonia*, usually translated as 'happiness', which coincides with a life lived according to the highest virtue (Book I: 7). For Aristotle, happiness is a virtuous activity in itself and not—as we tend to think today—a desirable end state that we strive toward. Happiness, understood as a way of living, brings humans the closest to the divine—an idea that is implicit in the term *eudaimonia*, which derives etymologically from *eu* (well) and *daimon* (spirit or divinity).

In pursuing the philosophical question of what a happy life is, Aristotle identifies a hierarchy between productive activity and non-productive activity. Productive activity is assigned a lower value because it contributes to ends that are external to the activity and because the external ends that are pursued are not complete. On the basis of this hierarchy, Aristotle considers the philosopher (*theoros*) to live the highest form of life because they contemplate for no other reason than for contemplation itself. Such a life stands in opposition to a life devoted to production. Aristotle reflects on the distinction between the two:

> [The activity of *theoria*] is the only one which is loved for its own sake; for nothing comes into being from it beyond the activity of contemplating, but from practical activities we produce something, be it great or small, beyond the actions themselves (Book X: 7, translation in Nightingale, 2001, p. 41).

In asking what constitutes the good life, Aristotle does in fact consider play as one possible answer. However, he ends up dismissing play as a suitable candidate, because, for him, play is something that serves work; it is a form of recreation, a relaxing activity that is required if one is to be productive in one's labors (Book X: 7). Aristotle thus subsumes play *under* work, rather than valuing it more highly, because it serves an external end—namely, to make one work more effectively in the sphere of production. But the fact that Aristotle explicitly asks whether playful activities qualify as a form of human expression that brings us closer to the divine is telling, for it shows us that Aristotle's notion of autotelic activity paves the way for an ethical understanding of play in our own time—that is, as intrinsically meaningful and redemptive.

There is, of course, a religious dimension to Aristotle's view. For Aristotle, we come closer to god (a supreme being

that is perfect in and of itself) by pursuing activities that are valuable in themselves. On this basis, there are forms of human activity that are more or less close to the gods. This is also a key assumption in the Abrahamic religions. God is perfect because He does not need anything beyond Himself, and theologians throughout the ages, most notably Thomas Aquinas, have noted the similarities between divine self-sufficiency and the mentality of those at play (Whidden, 2016). But it was only in the twentieth century that we began to see an extended engagement with the idea that play has redemptive qualities (e.g., Dahl, 1972; Ratzinger, 2000).

We can, for instance, recognize an explicitly Aristotelian point of departure in Hugo Rahner's theology of play. In *Man at Play* (2019), Rahner writes that play is 'an activity that is undertaken for the sake of being active…directed toward no end outside itself' (2019, p. 8). Rahner goes on to identify even stronger ties between playful activities and the divine, suggesting that the very distinction between work and play has to be understood in relation to the fall from grace. In paradise, humans were constantly at play in front of God. They did not need to work because they did not lack anything and there was nothing to be achieved. After the Fall, humans needed to work for a living, to engage in productive activities with external objectives, such as raising livestock and growing crops, which limits the time available for play. For Rahner, hard work is a marker of just how far we have fallen from our state of paradisiacal play.

Yet, for this reason, play on earth is a privileged form of human expression because it links us to God. In this context, Rahner draws on the image of the playing child. In play, the child engages in activities with no material constraints or concerns about productivity—they let their imagination run wild, without limitations. As such, child's play is a phenomenon that is analogous to divine creation, to the 'the joyous spontaneity of God's mind' that gave birth to the world (2019, p. 23). Humans can become reunited with God, then, only if we manage to live a playful life that is similar to the free expression of the playing child. Play offers the promise of redemption amidst the toils and temptations of a life on earth to the extent that 'only "little children" will enter the kingdom of heaven' (2019, p. 9)—'little children' who have learned to set aside worldly preoccupations that are directed toward ends and instead engage wholeheartedly in playful activities that are meaningful in themselves. For Rahner, play is like a dress rehearsal for the divine world that awaits us, a way to temporarily loosen the bonds that tie us to the profane world of work and productivity.

We can find a similar theological understanding of play in Romano Guardini's (1998) *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. Like Rahner, Guardini offers a version of Aristotle's distinction between autotelic activities and exotelic activities, distinguishing between phenomena that have a purpose outside of themselves and phenomena that are entirely self-sufficient and constitute ends in themselves. Purpose, for Guardini, is 'the goal of all effort, labor, and organization' (1998, p. 65)—the end to which our productive activities are normally directed, the busyness that preoccupies our daily lives (jobs, relationships, childcare, etc.). By contrast, phenomena that constitute ends in themselves are, strictly speaking, purposeless. Instead of having a purpose, these phenomena have *meaning*; their importance 'consists in being what they are' (1998, p. 63), not in doing what they do. And meaning, for Guardini, is 'the essence of existence, of flourishing, ripening life' (1998, p. 65), a view that resonates—in a secular context—with positive psychology books like *Flow* (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) and *Flourish* (Seligman, 2011) and indeed the gamification literature at large.

On earth, there are various phenomena that are meaningful in Guardini's sense, such as the playing of the child and the creating of the artist (Guardini, 1998, p. 65). Yet it is the liturgy, for Guardini, that provides the most important example of a meaningful phenomenon. Unlike child's play or creative art, the liturgy—the rituals of public worship in the church—exists not 'for the sake of humanity, but for the sake of God' (1998, p. 66). Activities that exist for the sake of God are not directed toward an external end because God, for Guardini, *is* the meaning of all life, complete in Himself. Human play in the form of the liturgy is thus a preparation for the afterlife in which humans are reunited with God.

This brief discussion of how Aristotle's idea of autotelic activity is mobilized in twentieth-century theology shows how play, as an activity that connects humans to God, can assume an ethical—or even divine—character. The main idea in the theology of play is that an autotelic agent, like a child or God, wants nothing and needs nothing beyond the experience of play. In Aristotle, the distinction between a mundane life of productivity and a divine life of self-sufficiency does not correspond to a strict division between an earthly life and a divine life; the difference is one of degree, whereby one is either closer to or further away from the divine. Nonetheless, the theology of play reiterates Aristotle's main point: activities that are pursued for their own sake are more meaningful—and more ethical—than the activities that are pursued toward some external goal.

In the next section, we return to workplace gamification and show why organizational play, even at its most autotelic, does not necessarily make work environments more virtuous.

The Ethical Ambivalence of Play

As we have seen, both proponents and critics of organizational play celebrate play for its autotelic character. Whether implicitly or explicitly, the gamification literature draws inspiration from the Aristotelian tradition by

valuing autotelic activity over exotelic activity. Echoing theologians like Rahner and Guardini, the gamification literature presents play—in its purest form—as a way to transcend the lower, material world and access a higher, more moral, sphere. This is, for instance, how we should understand Bateman's (2018) concept of 'cybervirtue' in relation to gamification: in its digital form, play is able to 'facilitate the good life' (2018, p. 1200) by stimulating autotelic activity. Or, in the words of Jane McGonigal (2012, p. 354), game design can be leveraged to 'fix' broken reality and generate 'real happiness' in society and organizations. What both proponents and critics have in common, then, is an assumption that nothing ethically problematic can ever result from instilling 'true' play into an organizational context—play that is oriented toward its own fulfillment, an end in itself. If there are any ethical problems with gamification—for example, that it is poorly designed, thoughtlessly implemented, alienating, exploitative, or whatever—then the solution is always 'deeper' forms of play. While there is an acknowledged 'dark side' (Hammedi, et al., 2021) to play, such as addiction or manipulation, the gamification literature assumes this is an aberration from play's ethical nature rather than a clue to its ethical ambivalence.

Play can do many things in the sphere of work. It can make work more engaging, it can connect people, it can break the ice, and it can spark creativity. But play can also diminish our critical reasoning, impair our judgment, and block out reality (Soderman, 2021). The opposition here is not between 'good' and 'bad' forms of gamification or between 'corrupted' and 'true' play. As a flow-inducing activity, play encourages us to forget—albeit partially and temporarily—that we are working. This is because play, in its most autotelic sense, causes external constraints to fade away until we are focused only on keeping the game going. Yet no matter how deeply we play, work will always retain its instrumental or exotelic nature—and no amount of humanistic gamification can hide this fact. In the context of pervasive games, which promise to solve everything from climate change to world hunger (McGonigal, 2014), Soderman (2021, p. 69) writes:

> Instead of solving…external issues that might contribute to feelings of alienation and depression, such as poverty, inequality, or injustice, flow and play can distract us from their effects and the examination of their root causes.

The same might be said of workplace gamification. Rather than solving the problem of meaningless work, flow and play in organizations can in fact prevent us from reflecting on what meaningful work might involve and how it might be achieved. To flesh out this point, we now turn to two illustrative examples of gamification—one from the sphere of machine gambling and one from the sphere of work.

In her landmark study *Addiction by Design*, Natasha Dow Schüll (2012) explores the dynamics of machine gambling (or 'machine play') in Las Vegas casinos. The aim, for serious players, is not primarily to win; the aim is to enter the 'machine zone,' a state of total absorption in which nothing else matters apart from the continuation of the game (2012, p. 2)—a truly autotelic experience from the perspective of the player. The computerized slot machine provides players with a buffer from normal life, an opportunity to forget about time, space, and one's bodily presence. Even money loses its real-world value for players, who 'become the game' and let go of all material concerns (2012, pp. 198–199). This type of phenomenon is well known to play theorists: play temporarily cuts us off from earthly relations and so creates the possibility of establishing a link to the sacred or, in secularized terms, a sphere of non-instrumentality and non-materiality (e.g., Carse, 2012; Huizinga, 1955; Martin, 1970). But in the case of Las Vegas multi-line slot machines, the player does not experience any sense of authentic human flourishing. On the contrary, they lose their money, their sense of self, and eventually their grip on everyday reality. As one of Schüll's interviewees puts it, the slot machine is 'a vacuum cleaner that sucks the life out of me and sucks me out of life' (2012, p 187). The case of machine gambling demonstrates that even the most perfect 'magic circle'—a play zone that exists (from the perspective of the player) solely for its own sake—does not necessarily provide meaning, let alone a higher moral purpose, for those within its limits. In fact, machine gambling causes untold harm for players: addiction, bankruptcy, and the destruction of the individual's life outside the game.

Casinos benefit from keeping the magic circle intact, insulating the player from everything outside of its zone. Tellingly, one of the slot machine designers interviewed by Schüll maintains that '[a]t all costs, the sanctity—the sacred nature of the game—must be protected' (p. 170), an assertion that contains an eerie echo of Rahner and Guardini. Here, the designer is saying that the autotelic nature of play must be preserved for players; the spell must not be broken. The reason for this is clear: if the player stops playing, the casino loses money. The computerized slot machine is strictly autotelic for the player, yet it is exotelic for the companies who profit from those who enter its sanctified machine zone. As Schüll puts it: '[A]lthough [the machine zone] carries no value in and of itself, it is possible to derive value from it' (2012, p. 74). In this sense, the magic circle is able to operate as part of a profit-maximizing business model without losing its essential character as a protected zone of 'free unreality' (Caillois, 2001, p. 7).

Critics have pointed out that there is a sharp distinction between gamification on the one hand and gambling—or,

in non-casino contexts, 'gamblification'—on the other (Macey & Hamari, 2022). On this view, gamification is said to motivate players via intrinsic rewards such as a sense of challenge and accomplishment, while gambling and gamblification are said to motivate players with extrinsic rewards, such as cash or redeemable tokens (2022, p. 12). Yet Schüll's analysis demonstrates that machine gambling is able to create a state of flow, or 'dark flow' (Dixon, et al., 2018), for players. Machine gambling is a 'highly engrossing game experience' and, for this reason, provides players with 'relief from…negative affect' (2018, p. 83)—at the same time as it prevents them from addressing the cause of their discontent and, indeed, exacerbates their personal problems. What is at stake in machine gambling is not necessarily an anticipated monetary reward, but rather a feeling of 'all-encompassing absorption' (2018, p. 76). In other words, digital play (including multi-line slot machines) is not just a 'motivation engine' (Paharia, 2013, p. 3) or an 'engagement engine' (Dignan, 2011, p. 3); it is also a reality detachment engine, one that is geared entirely toward the prolongation of play. To this extent, the case of machine gambling illustrates the dangers of autotelic activities—a danger that has been explored in the field of gambling studies (e.g., Larche, et al., 2021; Lavoie & Main, 2019; Trivedi & Teichert, 2017), but has yet to inform research in the field of management and organization studies or business ethics.

We are now in a position to ask how Schüll's insights might enrich the study of organizational play and gamification. To answer this question, we can now turn to an illustrative example in the context of work—specifically, the gamification of Amazon warehouse labor. In 2021, it was reported that Amazon had expanded their in-house gamification program, 'FC Games,' to fulfillment centers across the USA and Europe (Martineau & Di Stefano, 2021). FC Games provides workers with a selection of 'mini games' that let them approach their work as if they were playing video games. Specifically, workers can choose between six 'arcade-style' options, with evocative names like Tamazilla, CastleCrafter, and Dragon Duel. These mini games are not simply for the workers' entertainment. They are also meant to keep track of how fast the work is performed and to nudge the worker to work faster. For example, *The Washington Post* reports that one mini game—MissionRacer—involves maneuvring a virtual car around a track in competition with other workers (Bensinger, 2019). As the workers pick products off the shelves at an intensifying rate, so the car increases in speed. Other mini games are more collaborative, such as one that—echoing the sandbox mechanics of *Minecraft*—lets workers build in-game castles together (Bensinger, 2019). For the warehouse workers, the work remains the same: they are still doing the same 'picking' and 'stowing,' but the video game layer promises to make the work more fun and engaging (or at least ease the mind-numbing boredom). For Amazon, the point of course is to boost productivity and decrease employee turnover.

Some would argue that FC Games is a poor example of gamification because Amazon does little more than place a wafer-thin game layer over normal work processes. As a consequence, it might be argued that FC Games does not tap into the real drivers of human motivation that the likes of Deci and Ryan, among others, identify. We disagree. Amazon's gamification program is a textbook example of gamification because it illustrates how organizations seek to mobilize flow and autotelicity in the pursuit of productivity. While at play, workers are invited to lose themselves in the game by racing cars or constructing castles. Here, we notice the parallels between the autotelic experiences reported by Schüll and those produced by FC Games. The aim of Las Vegas casino play and Amazon warehouse play is essentially the same, namely, to create a 'zone of optimal experience' (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, p. 67) in which people will play 'longer, faster, and more intensively' (Schüll, 2012, p. 21). Like multi-line slot machines, the arcade-style games on offer at Amazon are custom-built to transport the worker into a 'new reality' (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, p. 74), a reality in which questions about the value of one's labor or the meaning of one's work fade into the background. In short, creating an autotelic experience for workers means that their lives *feel* more 'rich, intense, and meaningful' (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, p. 70) without actually becoming so. What we see in the Amazon example, therefore, is not a watered down or corrupted version of 'true play,' cynically engineered for maximum efficiency. Instead, we witness the potential of play used for organizational ends. Play creates an immersive state of flow for the player, yet it does not necessarily result in authentic happiness or human flourishing. In fact, it may result in obscuring—and further entrenching—more systemic issues that lay outside the magic circle, such as poor pay, intrusive surveillance, and hazardous working conditions (Martineau & Di Stefano, 2021).

The case of Amazon warehouse play, viewed alongside the case of Las Vegas casino play, forces us to rethink the ethics of workplace gamification. In broad terms, the gamification literature recognizes that organizational play (digital or otherwise) may result in ethical issues: it may be coercive, deceptive, exploitative, or alienating, depending on how organizations tap into the spirit of play. Despite this recognition, both proponents and critics of gamification are reluctant to view play itself as part of the problem. The underlying assumption we find in the gamification literature—namely, that play (unlike work) points indelibly toward the good—is what Pat Kane (2005) approvingly calls 'the play ethic.' The play ethic is a belief in the power of play to expand human potential and, ultimately, 'liberate our best capacities from unnecessary control and regimentation' (2005, p. 7–8). From this perspective, play is a virtue in itself, a standard to which

gamification—through the felicitous use of game mechanics—ought to aspire. In reality, however, gamification does not offer redemption from work; instead, gamification allows us to momentarily *forget* about the control and regimentation that otherwise dictate our organizational lives. As long as we are faithful to the play ethic, as long as we maintain a belief in the redemptive promise of play, we will fail to subject this flow-induced forgetting to critical analysis. The risk, for organizational researchers and business ethicists, is that we unthinkingly reproduce a secularized theology of play—and, as a consequence, ignore or downplay the hazards of autotelic experience at work.

Csíkszentmihályi's theory of flow provides an instructive example for organization studies in terms of the direction *not* to take. Csíkszentmihályi spent most of his academic career studying flow in its many manifestations in work, music, yoga, and dancing, among other activities. Yet the play ethic is never far from the surface—indeed, the theory of flow originally emerged from Csíkszentmihályi's early research on play (Soderman, 2021, p. 32–33). For Csíkszentmihályi, there is no doubt that flow is inextricably linked to human flourishing. Flow, in other words, always leads to personal growth by offering individuals 'a taste of intense, unalienated enjoyment, and a positive connection with the world' (2021, p. 37). But this belief is no more than an article of faith, or what Soderman calls the 'ideology of flow' (2021, p. 62). It was a belief that prevented Csíkszentmihályi from considering how, for instance, corporations might develop digital tools to turn flow into a precision-engineered autotelic experience for employees—and how this might in fact prevent workers from raising critical questions about the nature and purpose of their labor. The play ethic, which underpins the ideology of flow, distracts us from more fundamental questions about what meaningful work might look like once it is stripped of any game layer.

Play is ethically ambivalent, and we ought to study it as such. So far, the gamification literature—both mainstream and critical—has been under the influence of the play ethic. For this reason, theorists of gamification have failed to grapple with the complex, contradictory realities of flow-inducing activities we find in organizational play and gamification. Of course, we find calls for 'deeper' play or 'truer' play, but rarely do we find analyses in the gamification literature that—like Schüll and the gambling literature—problematize play itself. Such an approach would involve, for instance, acknowledging that organizational play can be 'fun' and 'engaging' for individuals in one way while impoverishing their working life in other ways, or that organizational play can induce moments of optimal experience (during the game) and profound disillusionment (after the game). If the magic circle is understood as a space of human thriving, the emphasis is on maintaining its integrity. But once we recognize the play zone as morally ambiguous, the focus shifts to understanding how the magic circle affects those who find themselves within it—for better or for worse.

Conclusion

In this paper, we addressed two guiding questions: (1) where does the contemporary faith in play come from and (2) how does this faith conceal the ethical ambivalence of play? We answered the first question by showing that this faith has its roots in the Aristotelian tradition in Western philosophy and theology, a tradition that continues to inform debates around the meaning and significance of play in organizations. We answered the second question by arguing that this faith involves a belief in the redemptive powers of play, a conviction that play—whether analogue or digital—is the key to authentic happiness, or *eudaimonia*, and therefore meaningfulness at work. Ultimately, this faith serves to blind commentators to the 'dark side' of organizational play, such as its ability to harm workers through autotelic experiences.

As our lives become increasingly gamified (Jagoda, 2020), we can expect a proliferation of scholarship into the ethics of digital play—not least in the field of organization studies, a field that has largely remained outside debates that are already happening elsewhere, such as game studies (Vesa et al., 2017). To this end, we hope that scholars let go of their faith in play in order to develop a more nuanced engagement with autotelic experience in corporate contexts. For critical researchers, this might involve studying how social actors make sense of and engage with activities that are coded as 'playful' in organizational settings, rather than assuming that play—once stripped of its instrumentality—will inevitably liberate workers from capitalist discipline, disrupt managerial logic, or lead us toward the good life. Such an approach would allow us to move beyond the misleading binary between 'good' and 'bad' forms of gamification and to acknowledge, and further reflect upon, the ethical ambiguity of play in the sphere of business.

Beyond the gamification literature, our analysis also contributes to broader discussions about meaningful forms of work (e.g., Lysova et al., 2023; Michaelson, et al., 2014; Thorpe & Roper, 2019). Specifically, the paper challenges the idea that Aristotelian *eudaimonia* can be realized in the context of work without introducing new kinds of ethical ambiguities. Gamification is a practical attempt to bring autotelic activities into the workplace, which are aimed at creating intrinsically meaningful experiences for workers. On closer inspection, however, gamification reveals itself to be Janus faced: it may provoke joy and surprise in organizations, but it is just as capable of hindering critical reflection on what meaningful work might involve and how it might be achieved. This a powerful reminder that *eudaimonia* in the workplace is an elusive, perhaps impossible, ideal for

companies to live up to—especially when play is used as the vehicle for realizing it.

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