
VOLUME

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VOLUME IS A PROJECT
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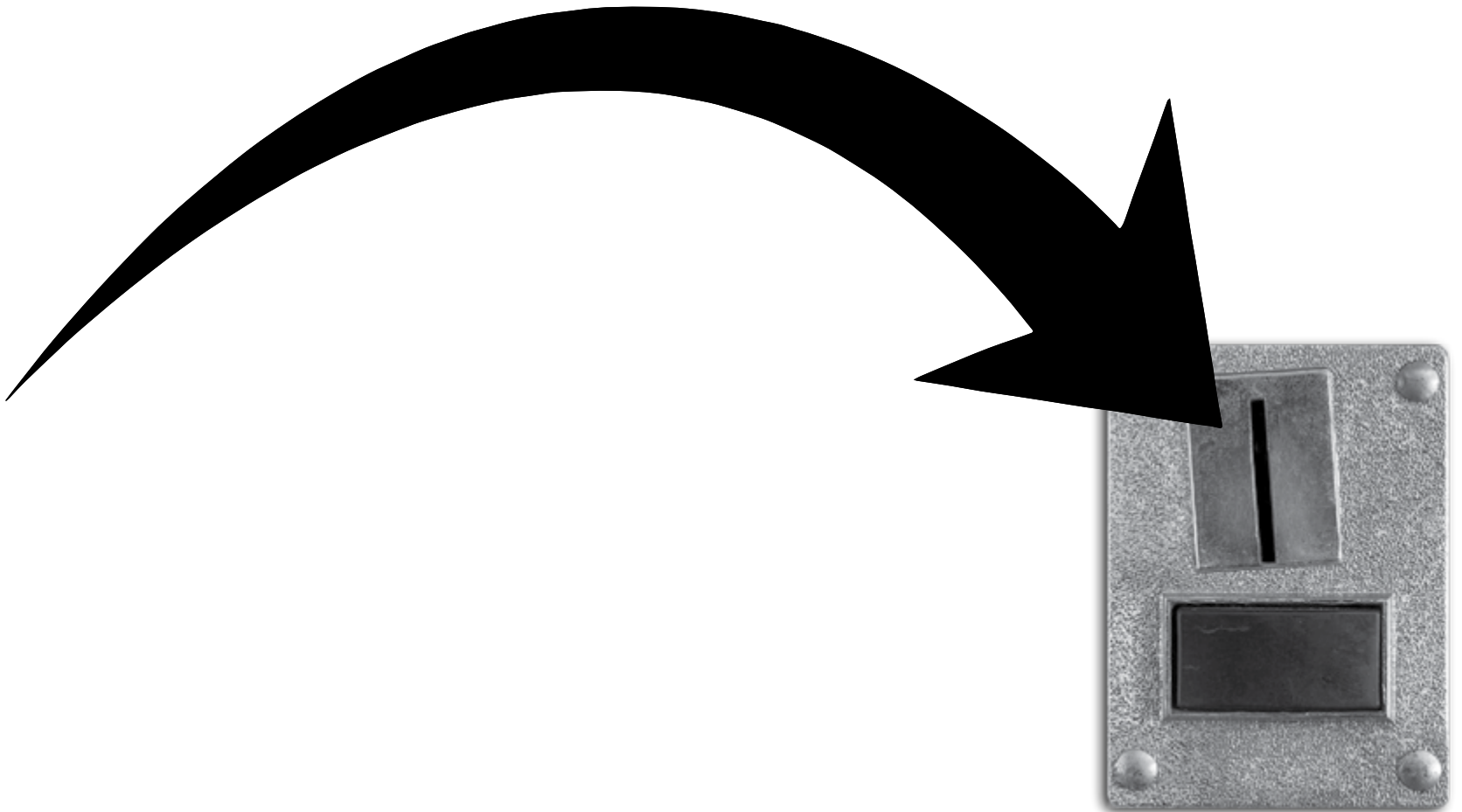
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PLAY- BOR

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LOVING GAMIFICATION DENISSE VEGA DE SANTIAGO

In every job that must be done
There is an element of fun
You find the fun and... snap!
The job's a game.
—Mary Poppins, 1964

LEVEL 0: THE NEED

Susy needed a job, any job. Her fancy degree in art history proved not to be very useful to pay the bills. Susy was living in a modern industrial harbor city. There must be some low paid industrial jobs, there must! – she thought many times while looking for a vacancy. And indeed, eventually, Susy found a job in an industrial warehouse. The company, one of the fastest growing online supermarkets in the country. A company which of course she'd never heard of before.

LEVEL 1: THE INTERVIEW

Susy waits in the waiting room, together with another girl. The radio is on, playing cheesy music. Then, a very tall girl picks them up, her white uniform says 'recruiter'. She guides them both around the various areas of the warehouse, the ambient areas and the very cold ones. Susy estimates that there are around 50-80 people working at this moment in time, she notices that everyone is dressed in different colors according to their position: trainees in orange; trainers in blue, regular workers or shoppers in red, captains in black, recruiters in white. In this colorful warehouse everyone seems kind of happy; smiling, laughing. Towards the end of the tour they pass by the 'playroom', where the workers are resting or playing ping-pong in one of the two 15 minute breaks they have. "WORK HARD, PLAY HARD", is written in white letters (almost as an order) in the back of the playroom on a huge red & shiny sign-board.

"Here we are like a family, we like people to be social," announces the recruiter at the recruiting office, she then introduces herself. Asking the candidates to do the same, Susy feels very awkward, and doesn't know what to say. The other girl has no problem, she said she is married, and that she likes to watch movies. Susy then says she enjoys reading. The tall recruiter invites them to play a sort of memory game, asking them to recall things she has already said about the job on offer. The game finishes and the recruiter exits the room, leaving the girls waiting for the final decision. In the meantime, the other girl speaks about how she has plenty of experience in supermarkets. Susy tells her she has none. "No worries, you

don't have any hobbies, so they will probably like you," the other girl casually reassures her. The recruiter returns: "Congratulations, you are both hired!"

LEVEL 2: THE TRAINING

She was so excited about her new job. (Finally, some money coming in!).

It's her first day. Susy and 20 other orange soldiers join the red lieutenants and gather around the captains in the ambient area expecting instructions, targets, and goals. Suddenly, the game is on, the race of 'picking products' starts. Everyone takes a scanner, logs in, and wears it, then each takes a heavy metal car filled with 18 totes. For her, picking is like doing the groceries and getting paid for it. It could be picking one pack of napkins, or it could be 60 beers. The scanner tells all, what product should be picked, which tote to place it in and which one is next. Towards the end of the race, the car gets heavier (plus, the industrial shoes are also very heavy!).

Susy loved picking products, since day one. Really. It seemed like a game. At first she was taking it easy, 'learning'. (Un)fortunately, this chilled attitude didn't last. Soon she noticed how the most experienced workers go crazy-fast; almost running, definitely sweating. Unbelievable. They seemed so skilled, so focused. Always finding ways to squeeze in and move their car faster throughout the aisles. There was this girl, probably the fastest of the warehouse, she was so beautiful (a kind of Moroccan beauty). She had a certain technique, like a ballerina she knew how to be precise, elegant, and fast with the movements of her body and handling of her scanner. Susy immediately looked up to her.



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2.1: THE FEEDBACK

“You have a very good average speed for your first day in picking!” the captain tells Susy at the end of the shift. She feels great! Over the following days blue trainers come up to her to give speed tips: “Just focus on not making mistakes and your average will immediately go up!”; “Always take the car in front of you!”; “Scan fast and close to the totes!”; “Always be close to the products you need to pick!” Unsurprisingly, some of these pieces of advice are actually helpful. She soon learns that having a good scanner and a car with good tires means everything. Everything! These two components can really make a difference of who wins the speed race.

2.2: PUNISHMENT & REWARDS

One day Susy clocked-in late (five minutes). She received a notification indicating she had been deducted 1 point. If she was to lose all 10 of her imaginary points, she would (not-imaginarily) lose the job too. After 1 month, her training was over. Susy finally reached the speed average that allowed her to move up to the next level. She received the acclaim highly desired by all trainees in the warehouse – the red shirt accrediting her as a regular worker. Of course, she couldn’t avoid the guilty satisfaction of receiving the red shirt sooner than her slower colleagues (some people stay in orange for months!).

LEVEL 3: THE FREEZERS

The end of Susy’s training meant only one thing: she was ready for the freezers. Being in ambient is level one of the speed-game in the warehouse but the advanced levels are in the chilled area. While there are more activities to execute in the warehouse, such as receiving products, everyone knows that picking is the best. Especially in the freezers, the kingdom of the fastest. Only the fastest find ‘the cold’ exciting and exhilarating, the rest (the slow ones) complain, as usual.

Susy had never experienced anything like it: standing the whole day in the cold, shaking, wearing a thermal jacket, gloves. She loved it. Everyone seemed so tough, so strong. It was kind of sexy. There was something about the physicality of it that excited her overwhelmingly; the sweating in the cold air; the pumping of adrenaline; the thrill of going fast. Also, nobody in the warehouse got paid more for being faster or for breaking records. It all obeyed an internal logic. There was something in the air. The fastest were the coolest and everyone knew who they were (since all the records are digitally displayed). Fast guys bragged with girls about being fast and they like fast girls. But girls too liked being fast. Guys kept on telling Susy things like, “you are on fire today!” and, “you are like Speedy Gonzalez!”.

She felt good. She went faster. Obviously. How couldn’t she? They are always looking.

In this game everything is accounted for. Not only the hours of work but also the bodily forces. As long as Susy is connected to the scanner, *they* know everything about her body: when she is tired and slows down, when she stops, when she is in her highest levels of adrenaline and excitement. *They* are not just the supervisors, *they* are everyone. Because everyone stares at the screens, and because the screens tell everyone everything: her position, average, lines, time, and speed. For Susy, it was like an awkward (yet exciting) feeling of being naked, knowing that other people are seeing you naked, and that there is nothing left to do except to keep performing while they keep staring. A never-ending exposure of her biometrical progress.

GAME OVER

The more time Susy spent in the freezers the faster she became, and her reality started to collapse. It was here where gamification really got under her skin. The job really had become a game. A very exhilarating, fast, and sexy game. And she loved it. It made her sharper, more ambitious, and stronger. It made her want more. Even the ‘burn-out’ she experienced after work seemed to be worth it. Every day, after the game is over she goes home destroyed. Although, the game is never really over since the app is a finger-tap away on her phone. There, there was always a new speed record speed and someone commenting on those records. She carries all that excitement everywhere she goes. The tiredness of her body was excruciating. Agony. But in the midst of her exhaustion there also existed the feeling of reward and satisfaction, the feeling that her extreme tiredness had been the result of something productive, that she had been paid for every single second her body was performing labor. And Susy couldn’t wait to start a new game the next day.

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PROFANING GAMIFICATION DENISSE VEGA DE SANTIAGO



Playroom of an undisclosed gamified warehouse.

To return to play its purely profane vocation is a political task.
— Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, 2005.

Gamification is a hot topic. Articles on economic gamification have increased in recent years exposing how today's corporations implement play and games in work environments. The argument is clear: gamification is one of the latest trends of post-industrial capitalism to lure the workers into playful self-exploitative conditions of labor. Gamification works because it gets under the skin of the workers. Workers love playing the job, the job feels like a fast game, and they get paid for it. Perfect.

Both online and offline retailers, such as Amazon and Walmart have found gamification to be an effective tool to increase productivity in processes and workers' engagement. When it comes to labor, gamification, very broadly defined as "the implementation of game-elements in non-game environments", seems to actually achieve the promises of "making the workers feel empowered" "increasing engagement" and "achieving the goals of the activity."¹ Such achievements in the context of capitalism, as we all know, only mean one thing: more profit for the corporations through exploitation of the workers. The power of gamification in the warehouses of online supermarkets is not to be found in the cognitive dimension, as in the high-skilled creative labor environments of Silicon Valley's tech-giants, but mainly through the rigorous training of the worker's body that performs playbor: the execution of play and work in the very same act.

Are warehouse workers condemned to a kind of perpetual gamified self-exploitation generated by gamification techniques? Or, is it perhaps that in that the appropriation of play by late-capitalism and its resulted playbor, there still exist some residues of the intrinsic disruptive nature of play? If workers are to turn playbor around, they need to reclaim the profane nature play once had and use it as it has always intended to be: a tool for emancipation.

PLAY: THE PROFANE MYTH

Play in its most pure state is intrinsically profane and disruptive. Giorgio Agamben's analogy of a cat that plays with yarn is illustrative of this argument:

"The cat who plays with a ball of yarn as if it were a mouse – just as the child plays with ancient religious symbols or objects that once belonged to the economic sphere – knowingly uses the characteristic behaviors of predatory activity (or, in the case of the child, of the religious cult or the world of work) in vain. These behaviors are not effaced, but, thanks to the substitution of the yarn for the mouse (or the toy for the sacred object), deactivated and thus open to a new possible use."²

THE INDIVIDUAL PRODUCED BY GAMIFICATION IS A PASSIONATE, PLAYFUL AND SELF-EXPLOITATIVE WORKER

Although, from the very beginning, play has been historically attached with a sacred and mythological nature,³ what interests Agamben about play is not so much its sacred origin, but how play also represents an overturning of the sacred: play as a tool for profanation. Understanding profanation as the returning of something to the common use of man. The cat by playing with the ball of yarn, is profaning, temporarily, the biological use nature provided it with: its predatory behavior. The kid that plays with a 'sacred' or 'serious' object, is profaning the intended use of that object, either the religious use or of that belonging to the economic sphere. Thus play entails a sacred origin but also an intrinsic profane nature.

Obviously play is a temporal issue. Probably right after playing with the ball, the cat would go and hunt the prey (the mouse), as usual. The profane power of play is not in changing the cat's (or children's, or worker's) behavior forever, but that through the temporal activity that play entails, "new uses" are activated. The more the child or the cat play the more they become exposed to those temporal moments of "means without an end".⁴

This temporal dimension of play becomes of a strategic importance for emancipatory politics. Emancipation through play does not mean freedom from religious concepts and the implementation of a perpetual freed behavior, but that through the finite duration of play, a different 'use' is temporally activated. The project of emancipation, as proposed by Rancière,

PERHAPS WAREHOUSE PLAYBOR, ALTHOUGH OF AN UNPROFANED NATURE, MIGHT NOT BE UNPROFANABLE

Mouffe, and Lacau, opposes the idea of a definite social consensus to be achieved. Instead, emancipation is envisaged as the implementation of what Rancière calls acts of 'dissensus', "intermittent acts of subjectivization that lack any overall principle or law and challenge the natural order of bodies in the name of equality".⁵ The kid that plays with a 'sacred' or 'serious' object, is profaning the intended use of that object, either religious or economic.

THE RITUAL OF GAMIFICATION AS PROCESS OF SUBJECTION

But what happens to this profane dimension of play when it is appropriated by capitalism and turned into playbor? Playbor does not represent a further profanation of play, but on the contrary, a further 'consecration' of that sacred dimension that play once overturned. Play, a free and profane activity, when instrumentalized by capitalism becomes again of a sacred nature. Playbor reproduces the perpetual separation that religion seeks to prevail between gods and humans – the sacred and the profane. Understanding capitalism as religion, as proposed by Walter Benjamin (and Agamben too), playbor consecrates the religion of capitalism. Playbor is impure, non-profane and non-emancipatory.

The power of warehouse playbor represents a return to the original disciplinary techniques of the 'training' of the human body in the early years of industrialization as analyzed by Foucault in the 70s. Foucault argued that the training of the worker's body was "turned into an 'aptitude', a 'capacity'" and "the power that result from it becomes a relation of strict subjection."⁶ By being a practice which its economic success heavily relies on, to the extent it controls the worker's behavior, both through his or her body and mind, gamification is indeed a 21st century disciplinary technique of subjection. The cognitive and physical manipulation enabled by the implementation of gamified techniques at work, such as points, rewards, and levels, allows gamification to perform a method of subjection through which specific identities are produced through the execution of playbor. In this Foucauldian/Deleuzian understanding of power, not as something that represses but expresses, or not as something that conceals but instead produces; gamification as power produces, as Foucault would say, realities, rituals of truth, knowledge and individuals. The individual produced by gamification is an enthusiastic, playful and self-exploitative worker, 'trained' to willingly, actively, and enthusiastically engage with the exploitative game of the capitalistic gamifiers.

So, what does playbor bring new to the tradition of disciplinary trainings as a technique for subjection? What is differences lay inside the warehouses of today



Screengrab of an employee's messageboard.

when compared with the factories of early industrialization as analyzed by Foucault? The processes of subjection executed through 21st-century warehouse playbor takes the form of an impassioned training process. Within the gamified warehouses, the training of the human body happens not only through the implementation of traditional game logics but also through notions of desire and passion. Although gamification makes the workers express themselves, by engaging them in *ludus* playbor, "at their own rhythm and pace", this passionate warehouse game is not one of liberation. The scanner; accompanies the worker at all moments of his or her labor, reporting back to the monitoring system which in turn pivots back in the digital channels of the gamifiers, the screens placed all over warehouses and speed records showed on digital apps. This exposure of the worker's body in action while performing playbor, is fundamental for its adequate execution.

This triangular logic of warehouse playbor: the passionate training, the performance of the human body playboring, and the never-ending exposure of biometrical information through digital channels (the average speeds of the worker's body while playboring), constitutes what Agamben, borrowing from Benjamin, calls "exhibition-value": the exposure of the forces of the body as part of an exhibitionary performance, appropriated by capitalism. The passionate performance of warehouse playbor: the play of the bodies accelerating picking products, the adrenaline generated by going fast, the imminent attraction to faster workers, is quickly captured by the apparatus of capitalism by turning it into an exhibition-value. Agamben argues that when the subject becomes aware, she or he is being exposed, loses her or his expressive dimension. In this passionate emerging of warehouse playbor and through its everyday training, warehouse playborers learn to acquire a certain vacuum against expression; "they show nothing but the showing itself [that is, one's own absolute mediality]."⁷⁷ This passionate exhibition-value of warehouse playbor is a new layer added by capitalism. This is what the spectacle of our gamified affective capitalism attempts to achieve: canalize the expressive forces, exploit the passions of the body but make sure such passions becomes immune to true expression or profanatory play. Or in other words, gamified capitalism aims at consecrating playbor, by making it of an unprofaned nature.

THE COUNTER-PASSIONS

However, there is perhaps something about this passionate performance of self-exploitation that contains residues of the profane dimension play had once. Perhaps warehouse playbor, although of an *unprofaned* nature, might not be *unprofanable*. As Agamben puts it: "... it is possible that the unprofanable, on which the capitalist religion is founded, is not truly such, and that today there are still effective forms of profanation."⁸ Obviously, playbor becoming passionate is the ultimate sign of subjection, but maybe, after all, this passionate subjection of the workers is not entirely subjected to the religion of capitalism. The residue of the profanity of play that still exist in playbor allows for the passionate subjectivities created by it to not be entirely self-exploitative and unprofaned but potentially emancipatory, dissented, and political.

Here is where the nature of the passions of the workers acquire a political meaning and become crucial to the counter-hegemonic struggle. As Chantal Mouffe argues, the "violent" nature of passions, underlines a dimension of conflict which suggests a confrontation of collective political identities.⁹ Such affective confrontation intrinsic to passionate subjectivities can potentially lead toward the construction of counter-political identities.

Passions today have a double role. They may be used towards progressive democratic ideals, or towards darker exploitative purposes. Our current state

IT WILL ULTIMATELY BE UP TO THE GAMIFIED WORKERS TO RECOVER THE PROFANE USE OF THEIR PLAY AND PASSIONS

of capitalism relies heavily in play, passions, and affects for its adequate reproduction. It will ultimately be up to the gamified community of workers to re-discover and recover the profane use of their play and passions, to create counter-passions. Such a political task will require even more discipline, creativity, and passion of *all* the workers (and of all of us, because gamification is happening everywhere). That it is a complex and scary task, yes. That it might be impossible, maybe. But attempting to reach the impossible is our only way to go. Emancipation today does not mean to escape; it means to engage. Engage with our gamified exploitative structures of power to twist the system and demand the impossible and profane ways of life that have been denied to us. Capitalism is playing with fire by using gamification to exploit its workers through a passionate playbor activity which, as we have discussed it has appropriated play and passions, two concepts intrinsically profane. Maybe one good day all the passionate workers will use all that energy to bring down the capitalist gamifiers and create a new kind of game, a new reign of equality, free play and friendship.

1 Takahashi, D. (2011). *By 2015, 50 percent of companies will embrace gamification, Gartner says*. Retrieved from: <https://venturebeat.com/2011/04/14/by-2015-50-percent-of-companies-will-embrace-gamification-gartner-says/>. (Accessed September 2019).

2 Agamben, G. (2005). *Profanations*. New York City, NY: Zone Books, 85.

3 Just as Dutch historian Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1938) recognized a sacred origin in games, Agamben does the same in *Profanations*: "It is well-known that the spheres of play and the sacred are closely connected. Most of our games today have their origin in ancient and sacred ceremonies, from divinatory practices and rituals that once belonged, broadly speaking, to the religious sphere". 75.

4 Ibid. 85-86.

5 Rancière, J. (2003). *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London: Bloomsbury, 95.

6 Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York City, NY: Pantheon Books, 138.

7 Agamben, G. (2005). *Profanations*. New York City, NY: Zone Books, 90.

8 Ibid. 82.

9 Mouffe, C. (2017). *The Role of Affects in Agonistic Politics*. in V. Cherepanyn, V. Havranek, & T. Stejskalova (Eds.), '68 NOW (pp. 69-81). Kiev, Ukr: Visual Culture Research Center, tranzit.cz, Archive Books Berlin, Kiev, pp. 70.