

# The Moral Calculus of Vocational Passion in Digital Gaming

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## Keywords

Digital labor, hobbies, passionate work, new economy, digital games

## INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, scholars have considered how digital play has converged with the work of media production. From esports and volunteer moderation to play-testing and click-work, the circuits of game production are accelerated by players' passionate engagements as fans and hobbyists, which are intertwined with their professional ambitions to join the industry. This desire for passionate work energizes social, cultural, and organizational practices that create economic value for companies, yet drain workers and aspirants through class-based expectations to compromise employment security for "doing what you love" (Tokumitsu 2015). Scholars have suggested how vocational ardor was deployed by human resource departments through self-help literature to manage worker expectations in an era of flexible employment (Gershon 2017). This romantic orientation towards one's livelihood operates through an ensemble of discourses, architectures, and administrative measures in popular culture, education, and industry (McRobbie 2016). Individuals regulate their desires by balancing hope for combining profit and pleasure with resignation about familiar tradeoffs between job satisfaction and security (Duffy 2016). What rationality underpins these taken-for-granted calculations about vocational compromise and compensation, and how can it be discursively disrupted?

## METHOD

This study is based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with players of games by an MMOG studio as they attended fan conventions and recruitment events, volunteered for co-creative development, and applied for positions in the digital games industry. This fieldwork took place over 18 months in Boston, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Reykjavik, and includes 20 in-depth player interviews. The studio's promotional texts, customer relations communications, and press reports were also analyzed.

## FINDINGS

These findings reveal a moral calculus patterning players' beliefs about how passionate employment compensates for precarity and workaholism, and how serious leisure careers stand in for narratives of professional development that elude many players. Hobbies are understood as using pleasurable conditions to compensate for negative aspects of work, thus vindicating its underlying work ethic. When adapted to post-Fordist creative

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industries such as digital gaming, this compensatory relationship between leisure and livelihood justified precariousness as a logical condition of passionate employment. This paper argues that this calculus of compensation, corruption, and sublimation between passion and profit can be traced back to industrialization's cleavage of labor from recreation and its institution of the hobby as productive leisure. By reversing the compensatory belief that concerns about profit corrupt the fervor of hobbies, the rhetoric of passionate work makes the sacrifices of precarity and aspirational labor reasonable.

The rhetoric of vocational fervor is a form of boundary work that exploits ambiguities in the post-Fordist reconfiguration of leisure and livelihood. Boundary work recognizes the inertia, ambivalence, and anxiety that are overlooked by hybrid concepts such as presumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2012) and playbour (Kücklich 2008), which oversimplify techno-cultural changes and legitimate ambiguities in players' relationships with media companies as consumers, volunteers, and employees. Individuals still make meaningful distinctions between work, life, and other key organizing categories of modern society, but any mass consensus about their inherence has eroded (Deuze 2006). These hybrid concepts were useful for signaling change, but now that this liminal state is calcifying, more precision is needed to understand their convergences and political stakes. Vocational passion festers within these calcifying hybridities by selectively emphasizing aspects of vocation and avocation to benefit businesses at the expense of aspirants, workers, and players. Gaming participation is particularly relevant for the study of post-Fordist boundary work because they are representationally and operationally reliant on the definition of rules and their parameters. Boundaries do not just define play, they also shape how individuals engage in interactive worlds, their platforms, communities, and industries.

## **SIGNIFICANCE**

Arguments about waged labor's imagined corruption of hobbies are not new (Taylor 2012; Gelber 1999). However, these studies have not investigated the connection between the passion that is corruptible by work, and the passion that promises to sublimate work from drudgery. This confounding logic holds the key to resisting ideologies about vocational passion, its legacy of productive leisure, and its morality of productivism. Attending to this boundary work gives people a collective language to reflect on their desires, question employment structures, and reconfigure the moral calculus for purposeful livelihoods outside of industrial-era notions of productivity and neoliberal notions of passion.

## **OPTIONAL BIO**

Aleena Chia (PhD, Indiana University) is postdoctoral researcher at the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies at the University of Jyväskylä. Her dissertation used ethnographic methods to investigate boundary work in multiplayer games on conceptual, infrastructural, and interpretive levels - as structuring categories in post-Fordism, as achievement systems in player communities, and as moral calculations in the new economy. Her work has been supported by a fieldwork grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, training from the School of Criticism and Theory, and an internship at Microsoft Research New England, and has been published in *American Behavioral Scientist* and the *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*.

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