# DON'T GET ME WRONG, IT'S FUN HERE, BUT…'
# AMBIVALENCE AND PARADOX IN A 'FUN' WORK ENVIRONMENT

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*A number of books written within the last few years have been telling employers and employees to have fun at work. Whether it is throwing a fish, squirting each other with water guns, or throwing a pie in the CEO's face. A problem with a number of these 'fun' books is that they do not define what fun is before letting the dogs loose. Rule number one is to clearly explain to the employees what fun is and what it is not. ('Workplace Tips', employer-employee.com) http://www.employer-employee.com/april2002tips.html*

For this management consultant, fun at work is not as straightforward as it seems. The 'wrong' sort of fun contains seeds of danger as the 'dogs' (ie employees) do things they should not do, disrupting the managerially legitimated order. Therefore, employees (and employers) need to be instructed on what does and does not constitute appropriate fun at work.

This is an intriguing perspective on what has become a mini industry of *prescribed* fun at work (Warren, 2005a). Fun, of course, may be more or less formally organized - such as 'fun' parties, learning events, or recreational 'experiences'. But fun programmes at work add a particular dimension of control and morality to the kinds of fun or mirth that employees *ought* to experience. Is this a mark of neo-humanism at work, aimed at increasing the overall sum of happiness, health and, presumably, productivity at work? If so, then some celebration of 'the childishness in us all' could be considered a good thing. Or, more critically, is such organized fun a new form of managerial control, a way of engineering employees' compliance to monotonous or stressful work through mood-elevating distractions? Viewed from this perspective, structured fun represents an

attempt to colonise the 'affective zone' of work and workplaces, so as to neutralise the impulse for dissent.

In this chapter, we address these questions. In doing so, we draw insights from an ethnography of a corporate fun programme where participants try to make sense of their feelings and experiences. This initiative consisted of an 'aestheticization' of the web-design department of a multinational IT firm, in the face of an otherwise traditional – even staid – existing organizational culture. For example, the office was decorated in bright, funky colours; meeting rooms were decked out with foam blocks and soft furnishings more usually seen in a children's nursery; and toys and games were provided by management which staff were encouraged to use. These fun activities, described in more detail in the case study below, constitute a subtle interpretative arena that belies the simple dualistic analysis of structured fun offered above. Participants often debunked or subverted the instruments of fun, while the very existence of a fun programme seemed also to contribute to employees feeling of wellness; indeed they felt special and valued because of the provision of the 'fun zone'.

We conclude by exploring the implications of the study for four possible, different and not necessarily mutually exclusive conceptual positions: (1) that 'managing' 'fun' is an oxymoron; they are mutually contradictory terms, so fun events must fail; (2) that prescribed fun at work is oppressive, silencing important, negative, voices; (3) that fun programmes might create spaces for collective rebellion; making fun of the fun programme is what is really fun; (4) and finally, that fun at work is a benign intervention, an incremental addition to wider social expectations about warm, friendly, conditions of work and the importance of 'all things fun' in everyday life; 'it's just part of being nice to work here'.

**'Work should be fun'**
The contemporary impact of the Industrial Revolution was one of heavy toil and regimented performance.   Fun and play were to be squeezed into whatever time was left after long and exhausting periods of work, paced by the relentlessness of the factory

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machines.  European Protestantism added an ascetic dimension to the seriousness of work: fun had no place in the redemptive role of hard toil and solemn application (Weber, 1958).  Early 19th century America witnessed a growth in mass, family, leisure facilities, a form of fun regarded by the establishment of Protestant ministers as a wholesome contribution  to a 'rounded' moral and physical character  (Uminowicz, 1992).  It also seeded the 'work hard, play hard' mantra, to become robust shorthand for self-improvement and achievement in capitalist societies.  Initially, however, play was to be quite separate from the working environment, a divorce that was not seriously challenged until the mid twentieth-century interest in corporate culture.  We see here, for example, Deal and Kennedy's (1982) influential claims that success of many blue chip American corporations could, in large measure, be put down to their organizational cultures that *intermix* work and play.  'Appropriate' fun, play, humour and jokes should, therefore, be seen as managerial resources that can be used positively to energise and motivate employees.  Play should be a legitimate facet of the *manifest* culture of the workplace.

Today, Deal and Kennedy's legacy can be detected in wide range of managerialist publications from 'humour consultants', prescribing regimes and techniques of play at work.  These authors, typically, underscore claims about the performance and bottom-line benefits of fun, also asserting that fun can improve workers' emotional and physical health (Blumfled, 1994; Conte, 1998; Segal & LaCroix, 2000; Yerkes, 2001).   This literature also connects with work that seeks to demonstrate humour's apparent health benefits and positive effect on perceived well-being (see for example, Thorson et al. 1997 and more critically, Martin 2001). Humour's apparent panaceaic qualities have been adopted enthusiastically by companies across different sectors, ranging from engineering and airlines to photographic processing and banking  (Caudron, 1992; Collinson, 2002; Meyer, 1999; Thomas, 1999). Particularly noteworthy are companies that rely on virtual communications served through call centres.  For example Alferoff and Knights (2003) describe how games and fancy dress are used by call centres in financial services, telecommunications and mail-order shopping. The humour is intended to ameliorate or palliate the often highly regulated and controlled environment of call centre work. Likewise, an Australian, multi-agency, call centre, celebrates its '3Fs': 'Focus, Fun,

Fulfilment', with events such as theme-dress days, team building exercises, alcohol periods, open flirting and exhortations to 'be yourself' (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). Kinnie et al (2000) report on a call-centre of a major UK bank where team bonding is encouraged through themed dressing-up days, raffles and prizes for 'good ideas'. Indeed, at the call-centre headquarters of Egg, a UK bank, play areas are interspersed amongst the open-plan work stations. An Egg employee explains …

> The places we work in are kitted out with designated chill out areas. So if you need to get away from the grindstone, there's somewhere to go and sit. You can even take in a game of pool or table football. On top of that, we have a relaxed, informal dress code – we want to get to work feeling comfortable. (In Bogdan, Norman, & Holm, 2005: 143)

The 'fun at work is good for you' discourse has been recently elevated by 'positive organizational scholarship' (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003b; Fineman, 2006). This American led, neo humanistic, movement is committed to understanding and promoting the 'upside' of working life. They are interested in the personal ingredients and circumstances that contribute to positive moods, wellbeing and happiness at work. In application, the approach endorses organizational development programmes that foster positive thinking, appreciation and fun. Amongst their 'positive' exemplars is Southwest Airline's 'corporate culture of fun' (Bernstein, 2003), an airline that seeks out 'positive people' to create a 'Positively Outrageous Spirit' (Deal & Kennedy, 1999; Sunoo, 1995). Such initiatives, according to positive scholars, humanise organizations by enhancing the mood, creativity and wellbeing of employees, and by reducing turnover and absenteeism (Ford, Newestom, & McLaughlin, 2004).

The infantile turn we see in many of these initiatives sits oddly with the image of grown-ups at work. Yet some observers regard this as more than simply a quirky or ephemeral addition to the armoury of management (Bogdan et al., 2005; Pinault, 2003). Rather (and arguably) it reflects a wider cultural predilection towards play as a new ethical ingredient of a 'fulfilled life in Western consumer cultures', and the 'growing cultural obsession with self-work and personal well-being in the West' (Bogdan et al., 2005: 142). It is no longer confined to the idiosyncrasies of a particular organizational culture, *a la* Deal and

Kennedy, but is something that workers of all grades and callings should expect.  The spirit of uninhibited play, therefore, in its purest form, is seen to touch an ever-receptive audience because it provides affective and productive energy, not the destructiveness feared by the commentator in our opening paragraph.

Yet crucial to such arguments is the extent to which designer fun can operate alongside, or even displace, the *real politick* of humour and fun in the workplace.  Our attention here is drawn to the 'unmanaged' political and psychodynamic arenas of work life (Gabriel, 1995).  It is where humour operates within essentially schismatic labour processes, characterised  by power imbalances within and between levels  of employees (Edwards, 1990).  Humour in these circumstances is seen to act as a countervailing force, temporarily soothing the effects of workplace humiliations and subjugations.  Jokes, satire and poking fun can score symbolic victories, evening out the emotive territory.  Importantly for our purposes here, this kind of humour is self and group authored and carefully coded for relevant audiences by the participants themselves, in stark contrast to the surface jollity, clowning and bubbly demeanour which saturates the pages of  manuals offering prescriptions for structured fun.

The subversive and survival role of humour is a  theme in critical writings in the field (eg: Rodriguez and Collinson 1997; Westwood 2004). Workgroup fun, at management's expense, can directly or indirectly weaken managerial authority.  Moreover, an individual's or group's identity can be defined through the humour it directs towards itself, and the deprecating jokes it aims at others (Collinson, 1988, 2002; Taylor & Bain, 2003).  Indeed, such community humour can be all that separates a barely tolerable job from an intolerable one. It is a survival mechanism, well illustrated by Taylor and Bain in their ethnography of UK call centres.  As one employee in their study comments  – *'People are unhappy – lots of things but mainly the calls…This place does your head in, if it wasn't for the jokers here it wouldn't be tolerable'* (2003: 1495).   Both management and customers were targets for the 'jokers', the latter silently mocked in non-verbal gestures during telephone conversations, or openly satired with the 'mute' button pressed

- ironically beneath a banner proclaiming the company's 'first commitment to meeting its customers' needs'[1].

Against this overall background, understanding the role of organized or 'designer' fun at work is clearly complex. The strands of thought we have outlined give us contrasting theoretical purchases. Organized fun can be seen to be a reflection of the growth of the 'feel good factor' in life, so even intrinsically routine or mundane tasks can be experienced as acceptable when there is a playful, positive, culture to the workplace.  By engineering work in this manner, managers and organizational consultants can be seen as simply reflecting the 'self-expressive' spirit of the age. Indeed, the importance of 'the good life'  in contemporary (developed Western)  culture is well illustrated by the incredulity that meets anyone who questions the premise that fun might not *prima facie* be a 'Good Thing' (Billig 2005). As Gabriel and Lang (1995: 100) similarly note, *"if we fail to enjoy life, it may be that we are failing to look after ourselves, weighed down by self-inflicted hang-ups and inhibitions"*

The second perspective noted in the introduction is less charitable towards the motives of the fun's instigators. It suggests that, as managers control the content and boundaries of fun, it is essentially a manipulative and diversionary device to entice greater productive value from employees. Workers may or may not engage willingly in 'having fun' and their responses are as likely to be cynical or ambivalent, as positive. Fun events, therefore, become sites to re-humour and subvert.  They are ironic emotional zones where grievances, dissatisfactions and identity are voiced.

We take these thoughts forward in considering a specific case of organized fun at work.

**Department X –   A Fun Workplace**

At the time of the research, Department X was the web-design department of a global I.T. firm (MCS) headquartered in the south of England. Its management had recently

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[1] Of course humour as a coping mechanism still serves a managerialist agenda by making time at work more palatable and enabling its continued performance.

instigated a programme of change to create an environment to stimulate the creative powers of the staff working there, whilst at the same time communicating the innovative Internet capabilities of the company to existing and potential clients. MCS were/ are not generally known for their innovative approach to Internet business, instead being more readily recognised as a traditional and rather staid (albeit prestigious) organization. This made the organization a particularly interesting case study because the changes at Department X were seemingly such a radical departure from their regular business practices. [2]

More specifically, and as briefly noted in our introduction, the changes centred on the physical working environment. The departmental office space was redesigned incorporating, among other things, a shiny floored, blue-lit elliptical corridor that diagonally bisected the space, glass walled offices and a room kitted out like a child's
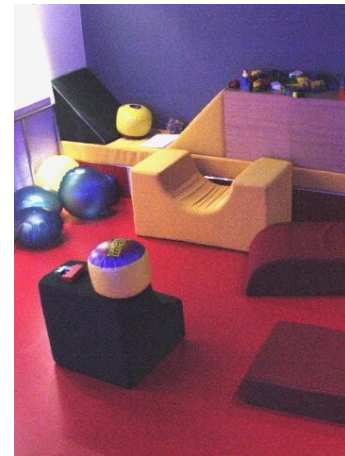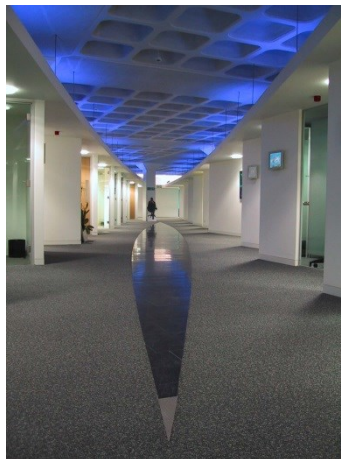


play-room: lined with padded blocks in primary colours, wipe-clean surfaces and unusual neon lighting. The office itself was redecorated in bright 'funky' colours, designer lockers were installed and the space was populated with toys, games and sculptures/ art objects. All of which, it was hoped, would foster the desired external image and internal climate – one of wild, wacky, playful innovation – in other words the workplace was designed to look and be fun.

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[2] .Attempts have been made to establish links between humour and creativity (eg. Murdock and Ganim 1993) which have been influential in organizational thinking around innovation and creative behaviour, although we are unaware if MCS's rationale for the programme included such studies.

The data presented here were gathered during a three month ethnography of Department X carried out by one us in March – May 2001 (Warren 2005b) in order to explore the increasing importance of aesthetics in organizational settings. Broadly speaking, the research turned on the question "How does it feel to work in an environment aesthetically manipulated to 'be fun'?" An ethnographic approach was adopted incorporating semi-structured interviewing as a research method. Respondents were also asked to take and discuss photographs of their workplace (Warren 2002, 2005b, 2005c). The images here are drawn from this data set and were taken by the participants in the study.

The most striking thing about these data is that they are characterised by paradox, ambivalence and apparent contradiction – as the title of this chapter suggests.  The respondents held conflicting views about the changes to their organization, their work and the workplace but these were not just differences between individuals as one would undoubtedly expect, but conflicting views *within* individuals' own accounts: ambivalent and/ or contradictory views were often held by the same respondent about the same issue. This was substantively interesting and intriguing as illustrated below, but also raises important issues of interpretation because as El-Sawad et al. (2004) point out, contradictory statements do not necessarily mean that the respondent who makes them *experiences* them in any way as contradictory (although of course, they may do).

As we have sketched out above, commentators on structured fun seem to fall into one of two opposing subject positions – either fun programmes are oppressive, or they are humanising.  From this, we might expect that employees required to participate in them would either hate or love them. However, as we are interpreting them, the data presented below indicate that fun at work for the employees involved is a manifold experience. For many of the people of Department X, at least, fun at work was loved, hated, valuable *and* unimportant - all at once.

*"It's SO embarrassing…"*
For several of the department members, and particularly the graphic design staff, being associated with the 'fun office' was deeply humiliating. A close-knit community, they

shared a professional identity that was built upon pride in their expertise and the work that they produced. For them, the managements' public insinuation that a brightly coloured 'play-room' could get their 'creative juices flowing' was insulting and embarrassing and just plain wrong. Shortly before the research was carried out, the Department had been featured on a local television news programme and subsequently reported in the national press. Members of staff had been asked to get down and 'play for the camera' with a range of toys – including Lego bricks – pretending that they were in the process of designing a web-site for a client. Deb a graphic designer, explains how she felt about this in the following excerpt from her interview transcript:

> …I don't think I'll ever be able to make the transition with playing with toys at work… We had this TV crew in and [our manager] was encouraging us to do this metaphor thing playing with Lego as a brainstorm for overcoming some sort of [problem]. We made up this brainstorm off the cuff that was just totally, total fluff and nonsense. And we were pretending that we use Lego in order to brainstorm customer ideas. [CRINGES] We don't use Lego for that. It's nonsense and in fact I think [the producers of the TV programme] used it as a stick to take the piss with - beat us with - really.

These opinions, and others like them within the data, suggest that the infantilising effect of the programme, coupled with its public 'promotion', was something which respondents felt belittled their status as professional people and moreover, something which was simply not necessary.   Having to act out their managers' fantasies about the programme simply reinforced their resentment.

There were other sentiments expressed about the incongruity of the fun programme with working life. When the office was first occupied, plastic 'nerf guns' were particularly popular.  They could fire soft-tipped missiles at high speed over surprisingly long distances. Many 'battles' took place (predominantly among the male members of the Department) by firing these projectiles up and over the central corridor in an attempt to hit unsuspecting passers-by beyond the partitions. After a short while, the use of the guns was curtailed after complaints from other –mostly female – staff as to the hazardous nature of the game.

Slightly less dramatic, but still significant, was the extent to which respondents reported that fun meant a noisy office in which it was difficult to work and a significant proportion of people reported taking work home so they could concentrate.

*All for show?*

Other respondents spoke of the superficiality of the whole programme, claiming that managements' intentions were not really to provide a more pleasing working environment but, instead, the whole campaign was a marketing gimmick. There was a strong feeling that the revamped office was a surface attempt to rejuvenate working conditions without paying attention to issues that mattered most to employees, such as the way staff felt unnecessarily micro-managed. Likewise, limited involvement in the design of the office and choice of 'fun objects' also lead to dissatisfaction and poor relationships with management.

The most notable example of this centred on a set of over-size 'Russian dolls' that had been commissioned for the reception area at a rumoured cost of £10,000. The dolls were decorated to look as if they were wearing business dress or, as one sceptical respondent put it, to resemble "a stupid f****** politically correct family". There was a large white male doll, a female, black and Asian males and one painted to look older than the rest. The dolls arrived in the office unannounced, coinciding with budget cuts for other, employee-favoured, aspects of the office. For example, the staff had requested a kitchenette so they could prepare food and drinks on occasions when looming deadlines meant they needed to work late into the night.

This was deemed too expensive to provide and even their request for a kettle was not honoured. Consequently, hot water had to be purchased from a vending machine at 8p per cup. The following passage is Jason's response when asked if there was anything he did not like about the new office:

"…certain things like these **stupid** Russian dolls which there's so much fuss going on about at the moment. They're kind of a centre of gossip. They [SIGH, LAUGH]... there's so much to say…. I can say there is a general feeling of complete dissatisfaction with the Russian dolls because of the way they were, [the way their arrival] was executed. It was forced down our throats. It was something that was [management's] concept not anybody else's. Now whilst he's the creative director, um and it goes without saying that his direction is the direction that the [department] should take, there is definite feeling of being railroaded into something that nobody wanted…"

The perceived superficiality of the changes also meant that employees just didn't 'buy in' to managements' ideas. They failed to engage in the fun that had been envisaged because, for them, the fun was political, or at the very least not really intended for them. It is a sentiment is evident in Guy's account of what he saw as the importance of the 'marketing' element of the Department:

"…it's the right environment to be advertising as. I don't know whether that necessarily means it's the best place to **work** but it's good to bring customers into, customers think, wow isn't this nice, you know they must be real hi-tech and everything and the fact that most people [here] have never actually used a flat screen or anything like [LAUGHS] we've all got big and bulky monitors and stuff but it looks nice!"

(Guy, Programmer)

Many of the respondents recounted similar sentiments during their interviews, their voices tinged with amusement because they regarded as the whole 'fun' initiative as mildly farcical and laughable, partly because they considered the rationale for the 'fun' environment was, above all else, to create the right impression to clients and it was, for them, amusing, that the reality of working in Department X was quite different.

*Poking fun at the fun*
When the Dolls first arrived, several members of staff started playing with them – having fun. For example, and with much amusement, respondents told stories about the Dolls appearing in unexpected places throughout the office after persons unknown had moved them when no-one was looking, or after hours when the office was empty. One story, recounted how a female member of staff had called security because she was convinced

there was a man in the ladies' toilets. When the security officer peered over the top of the toilet cubicle, however, the offending 'man' was one of the Dolls, 'sitting' on top of the toilet seat. Another example was the whole 'family' of Dolls being placed in the elevator when clients were due to visit. When the elevator doors opened one can imagine the clients' surprise at being greeted by five enormous dolls.

Such events tested the boundaries of 'acceptable fun'. Management were not impressed with the ways the Dolls were being used, complaining that they were being damaged in the process. They instructed staff not to play with them any more. This further angered those who had not wanted the dolls in the first place. Consequently, person(s) unknown took it upon themselves to punch one of the Dolls in the 'face', leaving an indented fist mark in its surface. This escalated the rift with management, the act interpreted as a malicious attempt to damage company property – an offence which, if repeated and the culprit caught, would result in summary dismissal. Two days later, a CCTV camera was installed to 'watch' the Dolls to prevent a reoccurrence. I asked Jason to explain how it happened:
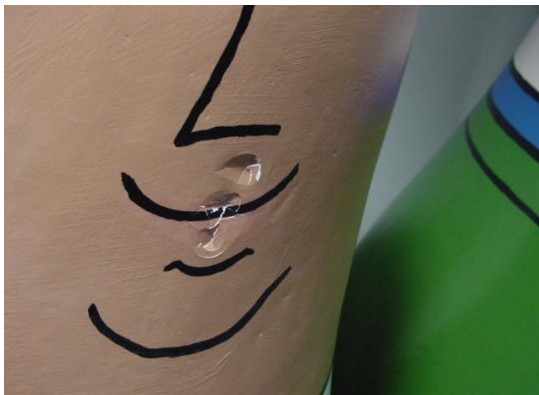


What the punch? Oh it was deliberate, yeah! It was just because they are stupid things! [UNCONTROLLABLE LAUGHTER] …sorry, sorry…. I know at least five other people who have done it [they] line up and take turns. It's just so so funny [STILL LAUGHING] and I know that we will now get sacked on the spot if we are caught doing it… [management have installed] a CCTV system to watch them.

Another fun, but unintended, consequence of the new office involved a microscooter which the staff had been allowed to purchase with company money. The scooter was very popular amongst staff for running errands and the like. We could surmise that their enjoyment was, in part, because they had some control over the choice and use of the scooter; it lacked the imposed character of other toys and games. But it was after hours when the scooter came into its own - as a vehicle for 'round the office races' against the

clock. One evening, during one such race, a health and safety official happened to walk past, colliding with the scooter and its rider. This resulted in an administrative furore, as well as an unusual entry in the accident book (no risk assessment had ever been done for the use of a scooter in an office).  Yet it was also the cause of much hilarity, as this excerpt from Deb's interview shows:

> "…we had a laugh on the microscooter awhile back, we got told off by the site services guy [because] we had a race around the [department] with the microscooter. There was only one person on it but there was a crash and it all got really ugly! [LAUGHING] …we got a whiteboard and somebody with a stopwatch and we had to go round the circuit and see who could do it quickest. And about half way through one of the site services guys came round - who's a very very miserable man and has no joy... and someone was going a bit too quick to make the corner and did a huge sort of like falling action over the settees and stuff [MIMES SLOW MOTION FALLING] over the end and this guy jumped out and said 'Stop! Health and Safety!' and we were all [MUCH LAUGHTER!], we dissolved into fits of laughter on the floor and er so the most the biggest laugh I've ever had in the office came out of the microscooter."
> (Deb, Designer)



The item was banned from use. However, instead of resignedly accepting this, the staff suggested they display warning signs on all entrances to the office so as to comply with health and safety legislation.  This took the form of a drawing of a microscooter in the centre of a red 'prohibited' triangle with the words 'Warning! Microscooter in use" written above and below. The sign does represent legislative compliance, but is also highly ironic, designed with tongue firmly in cheek. (INSERT SCOOTER-SIGN PICTURE AS THE TEXT LOSES ITS PUNCH WITHOUT IT. IDEALLY, ALL PICTURES SHOULD BE RETAINED AS THEY ARE INTRINSIC TO THE NARRATIVE).

*"But don't get me wrong…"*

The data presented so far suggests that the fun environment was perceived negatively by the employees.  Indeed, almost every respondent articulated dissatisfaction, scepticism and/ or insult concerning *some* aspect of the new office and its operation. However, this negativity was countered by the potential for 'real' fun that the environment offered, as the exemplified by the Dolls and the scooter - even though (perhaps because) such subversive fun carried with it a real risk of sanction.

Alongside the sense of cynicism about the 'effectiveness' of the new office as a 'creative space', respondents expressed the view that 'at least management are trying to change things, even if they are going about it the wrong way'.  This was a curious sentiment – best characterised as a mixture of 'patronising pride' – and often came from the same respondents who had spoken with bitterness about the whole programme. The tone of these conversations was condescending but benevolent, suggesting some deference to the power asymmetries.  Respondents seemed mindful of what they saw as managements' inability to 'do any better', but they were still 'proud' of them for trying in the first place. Giles and Deb express it in their own words:



"This one [photograph of a curvy bookshelf] I'd say was  a 'like' because they are attempting to [keep] the creative promise they were suggesting way back when… and every now and then you see it pops out in … very small subtle places. So… I like it because OK they were trying…. Bless! Lack of budget and the wrong people calling the shots [meant] it didn't happen everywhere else. So this was like a little oasis of 'almost creativity' really"

(Giles, Designer)

"When the pool table first arrived I played on it a couple of times and then I've not played on it since and I loved the fact that it's there because I think um it gives other people. It lifts the morale generally in the office and I think it probably tempts people to stay later umm even just to play on it, or it makes them happier to be working later in the evening knowing that there's been some thought put in by the management and the people who run the [department]."

(Deb, designer)



The sense of 'being valued' is suggested here. People felt attached to MCS because they had been allowed a fun, funky office. Moreover, one that was overtly designated as 'special' because it was accessible only by swipe-card, or 'badge locks'. Russell, a producer, echoes such sentiments - despite remarking earlier in the interview that 'such silliness' had no bearing on his working life whatsoever:

> That's something I like…the feeling that this area's special because it's … extra secured and I quite like [the] idea that I'm working … somewhere that's prized by [MCS] we're worth something, which is good. It's the best place to be and I like the kudos…

For Scott (also a producer), the company's fun setting also held contradictory meanings, his cynicism mixed with feelings of goodness about being in a comfortable workspace:

> [The company is] still a monolith of a dinosaur underneath – just tarted up to look a bit younger! But as I say I'm still glad to be here! Yeah and it's not just a case of I'd rather be here than somewhere else. It's not making a comparison – it's I like it here, compared to nothing. I like it. Like it **here**."

Kate, a designer, also reflects on her mixed emotions:

I don't know… It's nice – I like it, don't get me wrong! I'm not sure that it really improves my work because er, I'm still kind of at a desk, I'm still stuck to my PC so the only time I ever really take advantage of [the environment] is [when I'm] walking down the corridor to get a drink or go to the loo… I think it probably has uplifted my spirits sort of thing as in like, it would probably make me stay here, you know longer than I would have normally in a company. If anything it's a plus isn't it? I mean it's treating employees well and you know giving them an environment that would be nice to come to and I think that's important…"

## Discussion

Although the data we present here are not generalisable, in the sense that their idiosyncrasies can be directly mapped onto other locales, we do suggest that they offer tentative insights into fun programmes in other workplaces. Williams (2002) has used the phrase 'moderatum generalisation' to refer to this kind of speculative association, reminding us that:

> "If characteristics point to particular structures in one situation, then one can hypothesize that the existence of such structures in a further situation will lead to at least some similar characteristics... Though there may be evidence of a shared reality as experienced, or shared underlying structures, the complexity of these structures and the possibility of agency to transform them, means that generalizations can be only moderate ones."
> (Williams 2002: 138)

With this in mind, we offer four non-competing conceptualisations of structured fun at work that draw upon our case study.

### (1) *Managed fun – an oxymoron?*

Is there such a thing as unmanaged fun? As implied at the start of this chapter, fun can be more or less spontaneous, more or less self-authored, more or less subject to the rules of feeling and expression imposed by others (Bolton, 2004; Fineman, 2003). Yet we cannot envisage a situation where feelings of fun and joy are somehow free from any sort of social context or presentational norms. In other words, even in situations where fun and laughter appear spontaneous, there are social and cultural conventions that shape what is

felt, what is expressed and what is shared.   However, what is clear from the present case, the funness of a supposed fun working environment is complex and multifaceted.   Where fun is 'required' and its structure imposed, where it is heavily 'managed', the frisson of self-authorship and surprise are lost; feelings of fun are muted, heavily bounded or effectively extinguished.  In these circumstances people may still laugh and smile, but hollowed of any feelings of pleasure; behaving in ways that appear socially acceptable.  It is the emotional labour of keeping up appearances (see Critchley 2002: 12; Ashforth & Tomiuk, 2000).

Managing others' fun in an organization rubs against pre-existing perceptions of trust or distrust in management, as well as employee expectations about participation in decisions that will directly affect them.   As the example of the scooter accident and sign exemplifies, 'real' fun in organisations can be subversive and counter-establishment. If fun is instructed, pre-determined, and its outcomes highly controlled, then it can cease to engender fun – as the example of the Russian Dolls shows. The Dolls were *supposed* to be fun, so therefore they were not, exposing an 'unmanageable' dimension to work organizations that Gabriel (1995) identifies.

(2) *Fun as oppression/ silencing*
Discourses of control pave the way for the possibility that structured fun may actually be an oppressing experience for those involved. As noted in the case study, all respondents expressed dissatisfaction to some degree with the fun programme because they felt that other aspects of their working arrangements were more worthy of managerial attention. This is oppressive and silencing in several ways:

- Firstly, the 'fun' itself can be read as oppressive because it is difficult for an employee to refuse to participate. As Eadie (1999) notes, those who refuse to join in can be stigmatized, branded as having 'no sense of humour'.  Moreover, as much of the structured fun in the present case was male-oriented (and designed by men), we might reasonably expect women to feel especially pressured by such initiatives. We see this especially in the tale of the nerf guns.

- Secondly, fun programmes can bury more important considerations (to employees) under 'gaily painted aesthetic gloss' which (one assumes) is hoped will curry favour from employees without actually changing anything substantive;

- Thirdly, assuming that the programme does engender *some* feelings of fun, this may serve a 'safety-valve' function whereby employees are able to 'let off steam' in a safe manner that does not threaten the organizational status quo, thus silencing militant voices (eg: Radcliffe-Brown 1940, Collinson 2002);

- Finally, the very fact that management have benevolently bestowed the 'gift' of fun on their employees can be see as device to diffuse, rather than directly confront, disaffection amongst employees.

(3) *Fun as collective rebellion*

One outcome of the management/ structuring of fun is that humour arises not from the intended, but from the unintended consequences of the programme. The programme is a target of employee rebellion, and that irony is a source of mirth to those involved. We would argue that both the punching of the Russian Dolls and the designing of the scooter sign are fertile ground for fun, but not the sort of fun that was intended by management. The organizational consequences of this can be read in, at least, two ways: either management will attempt to control employees' behaviour (as in the installation of CCTV to 'watch' the Dolls after their assault), or they will 'turn a blind eye' and allow the subversive fun to continue. The former proposition returns to our conclusion in (1) above and supports the oxymoron; the second, however, carries with it some potentially problematic outcomes. Subversive fun is rarely kind to all it meets – somebody is often at the butt of the joke. Relatedly, 'harmless fun' to one person can easily be interpreted by others as a vehicle for racial, sexual or other harassment (Collinson 2002; Warren 2005a).

(4) *Fun at work? Of course!*

Finally, there exists the possibility, as strongly suggested by these data, that fun is increasingly an *expected* element of working life. The desire for working environments

that excite and delight can be conceptualised using two bodies of theory: which both centre on the growing normalisation of fun, pleasure and positivity more generally in contemporary culture – aestheticization and positive psychology.

The first of these is connected to the rise of the aesthetic in everyday life and the way all aspects of life seem increasingly subject to 'styling', or as Böhme (2003) puts it, 'staging' in order to remain valuable and/ or worthwhile. We have alluded to this notion of 'aestheticization' above in the case study; here we expand on these ideas a little more. Various explanations are given for the rise of aestheticization such as: increased affluence leading to a rise in consumerism; blurring of boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture under postmodern conditions; and the prevalence of mass media with its predilection for slick aesthetic presentations and reliance on image (for summaries see Featherstone 1991, Hancock 2003 and Warren 2005b). From shopping precincts to hospitals this trend is recognisable, we suggest, in almost all public spaces – including workplaces according to Bauman (1998). Bauman's hypothesis is that work is increasingly valued on account of its capacity to offer or generate aesthetic pleasure, rather than its potential to fulfil a sense of duty or 'calling', and/ or offer moral ennoblement. Instead of gaining dignity and a sense of self-worth from one's work (no matter how menial the task involved), Bauman argues that employees in contemporary consumer society choose their occupations and employers according to whether they promise exciting, stimulating activities carried out in fun environments, brimful of opportunities for new and varied experiences. In short, he suggests that the same aesthetic-hedonistic principles that drive our desire to consume are also beginning to govern the choices we make about our work.

Bauman view late capitalism as producing a *new* work ethic – one that is based on aesthetics and not ethics, and one which leads to the conclusion that work is no longer to be endured or avoided. Rather, it should be enjoyed as a leisure activity itself – or at the very least embraced as a vocation. He notes that these kinds of work are reserved for a privileged few in contemporary society and therefore asks, what of everyone else? He also observes that there is nothing especially new about some jobs affording aesthetic

engagement and the opportunity for self-fulfilment while some jobs do not. There have, of course, always been jobs that are monotonous, dull, routine, tedious, low status, banal and the like. But crucially, as he also tells us:

> "…the point was from the ethical perspective, no job could be seriously argued to be deprived of value and demeaning; all work equally served the cause of moral propriety and spiritual redemption. "
> (Bauman 1998: 33)

Whilst there are many critical voices on such social development (questioning whether the elevation of surface over substance is a good thing - see Welsch 1997 in particular), there can be little doubt that aesthetic considerations are now of prime social and organizational importance.   For our purposes, however, we wish only to note that the 'culture of beauty and fun' that aestheticization brings (or results from it, depending on which explanation one prefers), is likely to be permeating organizational boundaries for the reasons we outline above. As  Strati (2001) also notes, this is likely to be inevitable given that organizations are inextricable parts of wider cultural milieux; they are 'without walls'.

From the above proposition, it is a logical step to suggest that organizations will increasingly have to offer (or at least appear to offer) work that can generate these aesthetic possibilities if they are to entice people to work for them. We might also surmise that pay, under these conditions, will not work as a compensatory measure – since it is intrinsic satisfaction and the thrill of experience that people are demanding as their reward[3]. Could it be that structured fun programmes as aestheticization practices (and others like them) are organizational responses to a socio-cultural demand for aestheticized work?

Put another way, if we accept that fun is increasingly assumes a central role in life then, as we indicate here, it  may be reasonable to assume that employees will expect their

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[3] A need for intrinsic satisfaction is, of course, reminiscent of classic motivation theories which have repeatedly established this. What does seem to be a new departure here is the notion of 'thrilling experience' or 'excitement' and indeed 'fun' as a dimension of satisfaction.

*working* lives to offer opportunities for fun too. Thus, structured fun might be seen more positively as a fairly benign organizational response to employee expectations and, importantly, as something that is *enjoyed* by employees. Moreover, we might extrapolate that if organizations can offer environments where dull work can at least be carried out pleasurably, as a 'bolt on' to the job itself, they might just stand a chance of attracting and retaining relatively committed staff. If the reality of boring, monotonous and tightly controlled work can be smothered in a kitschy blanket of manufactured beauty and fun, then employees-cum-consumers might be persuaded to do it willingly – at least for a little while.

The recent, US-inspired, turn to positive organizational scholarship, as earlier mentioned, takes this argument a step further. Ducking the postmodern turn towards splintered ethics, positive scholars take the production of positive feelings, such as joy, happiness and well-being, as a key moral imperatives to 'virtuous' workplaces (see Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003a). They celebrate hedonistic work experiences such as 'engagement', and 'flow', and steer way from what they see as a preoccupation with negative experiences and problem fixing at work. Like aestheticization, these ideas have attracted some solid followership as well as sharp criticism, the latter focussing on the extent to which they are framed within a North American 'positive' culture, while also making few concessions to differences in ethnicity or gender (see Fineman, 2006). Furthermore, bracketing off positive feelings for special attention neglects the symbiotic, interactive, nature of positive, negative and ambivalent emotions. However, the positive verve does lend ideological and rhetorical support to notion that fun programmes should generate a 'motivating', 'feel good', factor to workplace experiences.

**Conclusions**

We have put forward these four frames in order to make sense of the phenomenon of structured fun and the case study data - in a way that does not assume that these management initiatives are necessarily *either* good *or* bad. Instead we hope to have shown that in this example at least, the lived reality of fun at work for these people was far more complex, invoking a range of political, ethical, aesthetic and emotional

responses and characterised by ambivalence and paradox. Our contribution to the important work already underway in relation to fun regimes in the workplace is to destabilise this positive/ negative dichotomy and to suggest alternative interpretations that seek to nuance the debate based on empirical data. In doing so we hope to have shown that a number of lenses might be usefully employed through which to explore the topic further.

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