

Find fun where you least expect it

by Oliver Burkeman

- 1 People who advocate "having more fun" in life are, generally speaking, the kind of people you (all right, I) want to punch. They're the David Brent-like bosses who make everyone do excruciating icebreaker exercises on office away-days; they're the train guards and cabin crew who mistakenly believe all passengers love it when they do silly voices. One especially annoying technology trend, "gamification", tries to turn mundane tasks into games with points and prizes, so that your trip to the gym becomes a "fitness quest", or housework a matter of fighting "chore wars" with your spouse. In my experience, these efforts to add a cheesy overlay of fun always fail, not least because they're a constant reminder that the underlying activity is so boring. If it weren't, why would you be trying so hard to make it fun in the first place?
- 2 The American game designer and critic Ian Bogost wouldn't dispute the cringeworthiness of this enforced jollity, but the real problem, he argues in a new book, *Play Anything*, is that we don't understand the nature of fun. We imagine that the way to relieve life's tedium is to escape from it, or try to pretend it's not happening. But true fun involves diving in and "taking the world at face value" — embracing the situation you're in, not pushing it away, and grappling with its built-in constraints. Bogost recalls dragging his four-year-old daughter through a crowded shopping mall, faster than her legs could carry her, and noticing that she was pulling against him, slowing down so that her feet never touched the cracks between floor tiles: a familiar children's game, made more challenging by her father's forward propulsion. She hadn't chosen her situation, but by creatively exploiting its limitations she turned it into a playground.
- 3 All of which goes to show that external constraints aren't antithetical to fun, but rather a precondition of it: a game with no limiting rules is no game at all. One curious consequence of this is that fun isn't always, or even usually, pleasurable. Ask any serious player of chess, golf or video games, and they'll concede it's often a struggle — otherwise, why bother playing? Fun, from this perspective, isn't a matter of enjoying yourself in the moment, but of looking back with satisfaction at having found creative new possibilities in whatever constraints you're facing.
- 4 Still, *Play Anything* isn't really just an argument for turning dull tasks into games. (Although it did make me feel better about the way I clean up after dinner, mentally dividing the kitchen into "zones", then clearing each one, like a military unit securing the area.) It's a manifesto for a different

attitude to the world. We're constantly trying to deal with the bits of everyday life we dislike by changing them, or changing ourselves. But what if we saw them with fresh eyes, as collections of constraints — like the rules of a game — and then asked what "moves" they might make possible? You might not enjoy them more. Yet, strangely, you'll probably have more fun.

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