From Homo Faber to Homo Ludens: Doing Serious Leisure in Paragliding

Abstract

Paragliding is a leisure pursuit that participants describe as play. It involves a literal loosening of earthly bonds to work, family and other duties and is a distinctively non-utilitarian experience. Like other forms of play, paragliding represents a quest for personal gratification, autonomy and even heroic individualism rather than social, fitness or health benefits. Yet pilots draw upon a range of managerial discourses and practices to *reproduce* aspects of 'work' upon their experience of flying. Using interviews and participant observation we explore how paragliders *work at play* and theorize this paradox through post-modern concepts of identity and meaning-making. We draw upon the idea of 'serious leisure' to set this in context and argue that a relational and 'messier' understanding of 'work' and 'play' is apposite in this sub-cultural setting.

Keywords: serious leisure, paragliding, flight,

For a long time now scholars have made creative use of the concept of *Homo Faber* to show how humans are distinctive among other animals in their ability to create and control the word around them (Arendt, 1958; Bergson, 1907; Ferrarin, 2000; Marx, 1897). 'Man the maker' is an engineer, a creator and an intelligent designer controlling the environment through tools; in short, he is able to control his own destiny by manipulating nature to suit distinctively human ends. In Max Frisch's (1957) novel, *Homo Faber*, the main character Walter Faber epitomises this sense of productive regularity in his desire for order, routine and results. He is an *organization man* (Whyte, 1956). In a flash of impulse, however, Faber escapes this mundane routine to take up the opportunity presented by the emergency landing of the aircraft in which he is a passenger. In becoming increasingly open to fate, Faber briefly becomes *Homo Ludens*; playful, 'free' and unencumbered by the mundane routines of productive labour.

Paraglider pilots draw upon a similar analysis to explain and describe their own experiences when they are engaged in flying. For them it is the individual experience of soaring above people, roads, trees and mountains that gives them a sense of "solitude, peace and complete freedom from the daily routines of work" and is an embodiment of "self reliance that means an escape from other people and other pressures" (from interview). Yet the argument that we propose in this article questions whether the lived experience of escape and freedom through flying constitutes straightforwardly playful leisure in the way that pilots seem to suggest. Our observations show that – in practice - paraglider pilots work hard to craft and manage these spaces of freedom and play; something that we call 'serious' leisure (Stebbins, 1992).

Faber versus ludens?

A clear division sometimes seems to operate between work and play particularly when actors are engaged in laborious, dull and repetitive work such as on the

factory floor (e.g., see Beynon, 1973) or in cases – like the slaughterhouse - where the work is 'dirty' and attracts low social status (e.g., see Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990). There is no shortage of literature to show how work functions practically to limit human freedom and playfulness (Sinclair, 2002). Much of this literature has pointed to the spaces and times when formal limits are creatively subverted and resisted (Brannan, 2005; Hawkins, 2009; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Roy, 1967; Willis, 1980). This growing body of literature often relies upon ethnography to document the creative and unexpected ways in which formal work gets punctuated by moments of disorder, practical jokes and, in short, play whether it be in offices (Grugulis, 2002; Hawkins, 2009 Plester, 2009), kitchens (Fine, 1996) hospitals and laboratories (Latour and Woolgar, 1986), the traditional factory shop-floor (Roy, 1967; Willis, 1980) or any number of different settings (Guillet de Monthoux et al., 2008; Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993; Hemplemann, 2003). Drawing upon – and sometimes against - this literature we argue that the overlap between work and play has been made even more complex in recent years; that is, in the period of post-modern capitalism that we currently inhabit (Lewis, 2003).

In many settings, the operation of – and resistance to – the power between boss and worker can no longer explained along straightforward lines (Land and Taylor, 2010; Lewis and Cooper, 2005). Technologies such as the 'Smart' phone, internet and lap-top computer have caused work to increasingly invade and colonize 'private' domestic life yet these same technologies often create the means by which employees can briefly play and resist the explicit demands of work. When employees engage in blogging, social networking and other forms of internet browsing at work, for example, they bring (more contemporary and arguably more covert) forms of playfulness into the routine working day (Harold, 2004). Yet contemporary scholarship seeking to explain how and why this happens, expressed particularly through discourses of the work-life balance, often continue to perpetuate the idea that this belies a dichotomous process in which there is a straightforward conflict between labour and leisure; that is between *homo faber* and *homo ludens*. It is this binary that we seek to erode here.

In doing so, we part with traditional modes of doing organizational ethnography within those work spaces and turn to the realm of play. We look for instances where work is intervening and shaping the experience of leisure. In exploring that, we show practically how modes of work can be transcribed, almost imperceptibly, onto what is ostensibly leisure time. The argument here is that both individual and collective experiences of play rest upon a messy and emergent interaction between differently embodied performances. Paraglider pilots often spend time thinking about flying, checking the weather forecast, or reading online blogs and forums when they are supposed to be 'at work' while they often borrow from the discourses, modes and managerial ethos of 'work' when they are flying; a time when they are supposed to be less formal, less managerial and - ultimately - at play. It is this paradox which enables us to challenge traditional assumptions about the division inherent in talk of the work/life balance, and brings us closer to a constructionist view of identity in which selves – at work, at home or otherwise - are not fixed performances but mobile and multiple, emerging untidily from the interactions between actors and things.

Different identity performances not only come to the fore at different times but sometimes merge in ways that seem unexpected, paradoxical and 'messy' (Law, 1994; Wajcman et al, 2008). Our approach to understanding this phenomenon sociologically is to examine how the *idea* of social structure permeates the ways in which pilots frame their desire for freedom during play. We draw upon the approach of Jean Baudrillard and other postmodernists to argue that paragliding functions to represent both a figurative *and* a literal form of escape from the lived experience of routinized structural constraint (Baudrillard, 1993a). In doing so, its functional-value to pilots as an inherently playful exercise is heightened by its sign-value; the symbolism of freedom, escape and - in one pilot's words - the "pure joy" of the flying lifestyle. Paragliding is an embodiment of this sign-value, a metaphor that undermines simple categories that might otherwise be assumed between twin selves: homo ludens and homo faber.

How paragliders fly

The British Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association describe paragliding as follows:

> Imagine parking your car at a beautiful upland vantage point on a sparkling spring day. You open the boot and don flying suit and boots, then lift out your incredibly light flying machine in its carrying rucksack and trek off a few yards to where your friends are preparing to fly. After a few minutes spent inspecting your equipment you don helmet and harness, look around, allow the wind to raise the canopy - and launch off into space. This is paragliding!

The paraglider's flying equipment is both a useful and a symbolic instrument by which they manage this metaphoric 'escape'. Because it relies upon wind-power, the pilot uses a lightweight fabric canopy (wing) and seat (harness) which together fold down to the size of a large rucksack. The wing is inflated as the user runs down a hill or – if the contours of the hillside are not conducive to this take-off – the wing is inflated by being snatched up against the prevailing wind. Lift is produced by baffles that are sewn into the leading edge of this wing and toggles attached to the wing by thin string-like lines are grasped in each hand and used for steering (Cosgta & Chalip, 2005).

The experienced paraglider may travel many kilometres in the air (cross-country) while many pilots prefer to engage in more simple 'top-to-bottom' flights that take a route from take-off at the top of a mountain to the valley below (the landing field). One of the key goals in such forms of flying is to locate thermals; that is the upward surge of warm air that will lift them high away from the mountain into 'cloudbase' – the bottom of the cloud layer where thermals end. From successful manipulation of this technique the connection of human to the materials of flying brings about a unique effect of distance and perspective,

allowing pilots the chance to experience what they describe as "complete freedom, solitude and quiet". The means by which paragliders take off and fly is something which physically differentiates them from people on the ground. They are, like birds, able to swoop and soar while watching everything that is going on below from a sense of detachment and (welcome) isolation from the social world.

The history of paragliding is relatively short and has its roots in the military practices of the First World War. Due to the rudimentary navigation and enemy detection systems on submarines, it became a general practice to tow a marine with a parachute behind the submarine to visually locate unfriendly sea-crafts (Pagen, 1990). Nothing noteworthy appears to have happened with the technique of paragliding until the 1950s when the Paracommander canopy was invented. The oblong shape and inclusion of air vents allowed for better gliding and directional control and this made it useful to a wider range of users including NASA. It was this development that enabled it to become a leisure – rather than a military - activity.

Military functions aside, it is arguable that no human *needs* to fly in the ways that other 'natural' aviators such as birds and insects do. Yet pilots often say that they have a feeling of "need" to get away from their normal routines of work by paragliding (from fieldnotes). In doing so, it is important that they continue to upgrade and expand upon their flight apparatus and equipment. For many pilots, the equipment is an integral part of their experience and as one respondent put it; "a big part of the fun of this sport is having the right gear". Another pilot underlined that "playing with new toys" made the experience even more fun. So the utility of the flying apparatus taps into a commercial market for the purchase and exchange of leisure commodities just as it taps into other areas of human need; the psychological and socio-cultural desire to supplant usefulness with play (Baudrillard, 1968).

From the late nineteen seventies, paragliding became more widely acknowledged as a form of playful leisure activity but there were still some serious limitations in the technical qualities of the equipment. Whilst the old-style canopies were relatively easy to control in terms of direction, the landing still presented a problem which was reflected in the high number of broken toes, ankles and legs (Pagen, 1990) – something which continues to be a problem (albeit for a lesser number of pilots). To combat this issue, there have been continual developments to test different fabrics, to alter the wing span and to modify the shape and trim of the numerous accessories and parts involved. Since the 1990s, paragliding equipment has developed more rapidly as it has grown in popularity. New style wings and harnesses are launched every year and with the cost of a full set of equipment – including flight computers, altitude meters, global positioning systems and other new technologies – reaching into the thousands of pounds, it is a reasonably expensive – and thus exclusive - hobby.

Why paragliders?

We selected paragliding as the ethnographic case study for expedient and purposeful reasons (Edwards and Skinner, 2009); firstly we have relatively straightforward access to paragliders because one of us has spent several hours flying in tandem with an experienced pilot at a number of the field sites. Secondly, flying (and specifically, flying away) represents a literal and symbolic loosening of earthly bonds to work, family and other duties. We argue that this creates a social environment in which the separation of work and leisure might be clearly identifiable and more readily discussed by participants. And, finally, we discovered an almost complete lack of sociological or ethnographic scholarship regarding this leisure activity which prompted us to scrutinise the features of this sub-culture in more depth.

We engaged with a longitudinal, multi-site ethnographic study of this community of ‘free-flight’ pilots largely by just ‘hanging around’ (Klein, 1993; Bourgois, 1995; Venkatesh, 2008) the take-off and landing fields at the popular hillside club at

Long Mynd (Shropshire) primarily and at various other sites in Cumbria, Derbyshire and the Welsh Borders. Pilots usually spend many hours of waiting time on the take-off hills – something they nicknamed “parawaiting” – these instances provided an excellent opportunity for ethnographic data collection. Data was also collected by participating in many of the social functions, meetings and talks at several of the regional ‘soaring clubs’ in the UK. The findings from this fieldwork were later compared and tested out by travelling to three major international flying destinations – Spain, Morocco and La Reunion where a broader spectrum of British and international pilots could be interviewed and observed. From the overall sample of over a hundred pilots, respondents were exclusively white European males, aged from thirty to sixty; most were forty five and over. Notes and (usually taped) semi-structured interview data was formally transcribed into a set of fieldnotes by one of the researchers and recurring themes and patterns were collectively discussed.

A further online survey was conducted with ten pilots selected on the basis of acquaintance through the main research project. This was used to follow up on emerging themes and to gain clarification of a number of technical points. For practical reasons not all the participants have been quoted in what follows although their responses have been considered in the arguments that we develop. In the next section, we discuss the key findings of the empirical part of the research; firstly by reflecting on the first-hand physical sensations of participation in this sport and secondly through the interview and observational data we gathered in the field.

A tale from the field

The following excerpt from the fieldnotes is a first-hand account of what it is like to fly a paraglider. These fieldnotes were recorded immediately after the first author’s first flight in the Lake District, United Kingdom:

It took an hour of hard walking and climbing for us to reach the summit of Whiteside. I tripped and stumbled over the scree and the loose rocks as we slowly ascended the hill, too tense and breathless to notice the scenery unfolding beneath me. When we arrived at the summit I was surprised by the beauty of the natural landscape that I now had a much better perspective on. Crummock Water twinkled in the late afternoon sunlight. I already knew that I had the option to fly down with Bob. He had made the ascent with a bulky tandem wing strapped to his back so that we might take off from the summit together but he said this was not compulsory if I was too afraid. We could still walk down the hill together. There was no chance for Bob to take-off alone because he was carrying a canopy and harness designed for two people so doing that would mean he would not only miss out on his favourite activity but that he had carried the gear up the hill for nothing. Looking at the steepness of the hill, and fearing a difficult and unnerving descent, I agreed to fly with him. I put on a cheerful voice because I felt afraid. He didn't notice and said I would love it.

We got strapped into the gear, nylon leg loops held me firmly to the harness seat and chest and arm straps made sure I was connected to Bob. I knew that if I analysed this process I would be too terrified to do what was necessary so I simply 'shut off' my (thinking) brain and went through the motions of preparation. Bob came to see what I had done and checked all the straps and buckles by tugging them. He had put on a flying suit over his shorts to keep himself warm, a scarf and a helmet. He handed me a similar helmet which I put on and buckled under the chin. It was time to take off. There was no time to think, the wind was just right. He laid out the wing behind us and instructed me to run as fast as I could towards the edge of the mountain's summit. I did so unquestioningly, pulling behind me the weight of the rapidly inflating wing canopy. With Bob strapped close behind me I ran, stumbling over loose rocks, towards the edge, my heart beating rapidly. I was even more terrified when the

ground swept away from beneath me as the wing pulled us both up powerfully into the air.

The ground was sloping down jaggedly to the valley floor below my now dangling feet. Bob's variometer bleeped robotically in my ear, telling me that we were ascending in a thermal wind and were now floating above the summit. But I was too frightened to open my eyes. I had trust in Bob. He was an experienced pilot who knew the area and its weather patterns so in my (logical) brain I knew that I was likely to be safe. This was something he did – and enjoyed – every weekend. Yet in my (sensing) brain I also felt deep, abject terror at the thought of the many thousands of metres of open space between my feet and the valley's bottom. My breath came in short gasps. I knew that looking at the space beneath us would make me panic. So I kept my eyes closed.

Within minutes Bob was telling me that we would soon be landing and said that on his command I should shuffle forward out of the seat and begin 'running' in mid-air. This would have the effect of cushioning and tempering our impact with the ground below. At this point, and without thinking, I opened my eyes for the first time. Still several hundred? metres above our landing field, the view of fields, trees and sheep bathed in the late afternoon sun was utterly spectacular. The colours – of the grass, water and sky – were all brighter than I had ever noticed them before. I was flying. I was elated. And yet I was also utterly helpless, incapable of *really* flying and I knew that a collapse of the wing could bring us crashing down to earth. We were not really birds, but people. People made of skin, blood, bones and muscle. We were delicate, breakable and vulnerable.

Bob began to swing the canopy around, making us whirl through the air like a sycamore leaf. He was whooping with excitement. I was quiet but I felt a moment of awe as I became a part of nature; *in* nature rather than

> looking *at* nature. I was a bird. I was a bee. I was in the sky! It was a pure moment of ineffable joy. In seconds we were only metres from the ground. I began to run in the air, feeling a little foolish. We touched the earth. I was desperately relieved to be on the ground – happy to be human again - but still euphoric from the brief experience of being in the air.

This is how one of the authors experienced paragliding for herself. It was an experience that had involved a literal escape from many of the routine emotions, memories, behaviours and identities that were normally experienced on the ground. It had produced a fleeting moment of "ineffable joy" and yet the underpinning feeling of terror was one which informed the next few attempts at tandem paragliding in different ways; sometimes it was the take-off which caused the most fear while at other times it was the landing. Bob claimed that pilots must "work through the fear" to become happy with the experience of flying every time.

The 'unnatural' practicalities of running off the hilltop, dangling vulnerably beneath the wing and finally coming to land were movements that seemed to compromise the sense of playful euphoria that such experienced pilots as Bob consistently refer to. At heart, this seems to stem from a feeling that flying is simply 'not natural' and not particularly 'human' either. Management of these emotions and discomforts requires persistent effort by the learner pilot. Yet at the same time, the brief sensation of the immanence of nature – a moment of escape from *being human* - means this activity reaches beyond sport into the domain of the spiritual experience. It is this sense that the pilot can almost "touch the face of God" that brings participants back to take-off again and again (Magee, 1989).

<u>Dividing work from play?</u>

Perhaps because they were able to deal with the fear of flying so adeptly, almost all the pilots we interviewed articulated a clear demarcation between work and play. They no longer felt they had to work at flying, and instead it was something that gave them an emotional and ineffable sense of freedom from other more mundane and routinized aspects of their life.

> It's just pure joy really...difficult to put into words...I love looking at the clouds and the terrain and thinking about my options to keep the day alive.

Pilots seemed happy that this was an experience which, unlike work or caring duties within the family had no apparent use value. In Baudrillard's terminology, this was the enactment of a symbolic rather than a functional need (Baudrillard, 1968). The main goal here was not even for them to improve their fitness but was usually expressed as a desire to gain a different – and sometimes inexpressibly joyful - perspective on the world below. Differing from more organized forms of sports, paragliding need not involve others or involve exceptional physical strength or fitness. So in listening to the respondents we interviewed, it seemed that its chief purpose was pleasure derived from the experience of freedom; the carving out of a temporal niche that provided a brief respite from more organized routines and even other people.

> When I'm on the hill, I am completely thinking about flying. There isn't anything in my mind except from the wing, the air… the task in hand. I'm not interested in the things I should have done at work… or chores I have to do at home. I just want to have a memorable day in the air. It's the life in your days not the days in your life!

Paragliding here is described as something to "get away" to in leisure time; a brief window of opportunity which permitted pilots to be spatially absent from

formal and domestic forms of ‘work’ and move into (arguably masculine) modes of playfulness with other like-minded individuals.

> Paragliding is something that doesn’t seem to fit around your everyday life very well. So when you get away it’s good to talk about it with other guys and immerse yourself in it.
>
> ...
>
> I often daydream too much about flying when I am at work. I’ll often go online and check the weather, for example, even if I know I won’t be leaving the office until it’s too late to go flying. But it’s the idea that I *could* go flying that… sort of keeps me going.

Paragliding provided an experience that was entirely different from normal repertoires of labour, organizational, domestic, emotional or otherwise. The data that we collected in interviews with paragliders suggests that strict binary categories to separate work and leisure time are spoken of by pilots as factual distinctions which they claimed existed in ‘real’ ways. The playfulness associated with this activity seemed to involve a literal and physical loosening of the “surly bonds” of work, family and other daily duties (Magee, 1989).

Creating autonomy

Several respondents underlined their demand for freedom through flight by stressing the importance of *autonomy* as an aspect of paragliding. It was important to the pilots that they articulated a symbolic but clear demarcation between paragliding and other aspects of their life such as family time and paid work. So identity work was being done to insert a symbolic detachment between these divergent selves. In so doing, freedom was experienced by distancing themselves from ‘homo faber’, albeit for a brief period. To illustrate this, several pilots explained that they enjoyed getting away on organised paragliding holidays – specialist package trips that involved daily flying, coaching and

socializing. One pilot framed this in terms of a “selfish” desire for individual (and ostensibly masculine) autonomy:

> It is selfish of me to be away for two weeks with a bunch of lads I suppose… but I think you have to have a bit of time to do your own hobbies…and if they [family] aren’t interested in sharing this with me…then I guess I just have to say…well…that’s me. I want to do it

The apparent individualism of the pilots points to a heroic form of play; the idea that the participant is battling nature by his wits to stay alive. As one pilot claimed; “It’s me against gravity and any decision you make is yours and yours alone.” Another said, displaying male bravado, that a pilot’s mistakes “tend not to be forgiven”.

Heroic individualism

Clearly errors of judgement or technical ability sometimes have fatal ramifications, something that pilots knew as a risk that their sense of autonomy also carried. Any accidents that did occur were reported and investigated through the official governing body of the paragliding community and fatalities were rare and unfortunate annual occurrence. Yet pilots seemed to accept that the risk of injury and even death was something that they could deal with in order to experience the emotional and spiritual ‘highs’ of the activity. Even the names that manufacturers gave to their wing canopies and harnesses hinted at this dangerous compulsion; “Poison”, “Venom”, “Tequila” and “Joint”.

Autonomy here is described as a sort of ‘fatal’ addiction – something that pilots craved but knew was also dangerous in a primeval human way. The Icarus-like heroism involved in coping with this risk relies upon a highly idealized conceptualization of play to cope with – and compensate for – the risks involved. One wing manufacturer’s advert makes this very clear:

“To live your dreams…

…You must first dream them.

When flying is in your nature

You’re fuelled by big dreams

Because one day

You know you’ll live them”

(Advance marketing campaign, August 2011)

But as to how this ideal of *living one’s dreams* is actualized for pilots, we must turn back to more mundane and earthly factors. While our research points to the motivation of pilots (typically males) to “be away” from home and work life, its mundane routine and duties, it usually seemed that their partners (typically female) were more entrenched in domestic responsibility and thus, arguably, worked to enable pilots to be away through their own performances of ‘Homo Faber’. To illuminate this better, it is worth quoting at length from an interview conducted with an all-male group on a paragliding holiday in Spain:

> Ethnographer: Do your partners ever come with you on these paragliding holidays?
>
> Pilot 1: No way. She’d think to herself, ‘what am I supposed to do while he’s messing about up a hill?’ She’d say something like that…to me…sort of… ‘what should I do while you’re hanging around? What’s in it for me?’
>
> Pilot 2: No, I have two kids…and a wife… but they are just not interested in it.
>
> Ethnographer: Why do you suppose that is? Is it because they don’t actually do the sport?

> Pilot 2: Well I suppose that's partly it. It's my thing. My wife, for example, gets a bit fucked off with me doing it to tell the truth, says it is very selfish. She once came to take-off with me but got bored very quickly. She felt there was a lot of waiting around for the wind to get up. She didn't want to talk to the other pilots…there were no other women there.

> Pilot 3: My wife would just say 'what can I do?' While I am up in the air, having a great time, sort of thing, she'd be down here complaining that there is nothing for her to do when I'm not around. There ain't no way she'd come with me. I don't really care if she watches me anyway.

The participants were keen to emphasize that paragliding was 'their thing' and not something that they wished to bring into contact with their other identities; that of father, husband or organization man. As another respondent put it; "[paragliding's] about control, solitude and distance from normal life". Comments such as these seemed to suggest that pilots wished to be *free from* work and even periodically from other people to commit themselves fully to the experience of flying and - on the surface at least - it seemed to reinforce traditional modes of viewing working identity as separate and distinctive from the 'true' self.

However, through observation, we began to see the apparently clear-cut and dichotomous distinction between 'work' and 'play' break down. When pilots spoke about their commitment to making time for this pursuit, it seemed that what had up to this point been a (ostensibly) clear demarcation line between work, family life and paragliding began to blur as a considerable degree of seriousness was increasingly expressed. One respondent framed this as a form of self-discipline and control:

> I want to test myself and really push on, because I can't at home when I have to get home from work, do homework with the kids… help around the house a bit.

This respondent claimed that the desire to fly sprang from the need to "push" and "test" himself. This particular pilot was a beginner – something that he marked out by wearing a trailing red ribbon from his harness. He aimed to become a "sky god" – the paragliding terminology for a highly skilled, highly experienced pilot. Through the emphasis on "control" a measure of 'work' was clearly implemented – both by him *and* less obviously, his family - to make this happen. It was a first glimpse of the measure of seriousness and commitment that this leisure pursuit seemed to exert.

Discipline and self-control

While flying was considered to be a means to enjoy a moment of autonomy and heroism it seemed that forms of labour – both their own and that of other people - were in process to create the space for that very experience to be enjoyed. This was a recurring theme in the observational data and was frequently expressed in terms of the frustration that was typical when other commitments imposed upon the ability to fly.

> I'm currently only a weekend warrior, but I'm looking to improve my air time by taking a month off work to practice inland thermic flying in the UK… and spend some serious time in the air.

In such apparently "serious" leisure, participants find activities like paragliding so substantial and interesting that, in a typical case, they launch themselves on a "career centred on acquiring and expressing specific skills" (Stebbins, 1992: 3). It is this career that can take the pilot from the red ribbon learner to the status of a sky god. Clearly, then, while paragliding is something that is different from work, an activity that is inherently playful, it has a serious component which blurs traditional borders between work and leisure. Previous studies of other forms of such 'serious leisure' are united by the observation that participants orchestrate their lives in such a way that their leisure activity becomes the focal point (for a

list of relevant studies see Raisborough, 2006). Our participants displayed a similarly serious pattern of leisure practice, something that was emphasized by their tendency to berate themselves for not making time for flying.

We found that it is rare for pilots to openly criticize their paid work as a reason for not being able to fly yet, at the same time, it is very common that they criticize *themselves* (and sometimes their immediate family members) for not 'finding' the time to fly. So it is with the pilots that the responsibility for carving out the right work/life balance apparently rests.

> I'm not getting enough air time at the moment and I feel bad because that's my fault. I'm letting work take over. I need to fly. I need to get out on the hills.

In expressing comments like these, this pilot unwittingly reproduces and entrenches himself further in the sense of entrapment that he is trying to (literally) escape. By turning the responsibility for time management back to the individual, this leisure pursuit becomes 'work'. Pilots do not often claim that is the task of their employer or corporation to step back from the apparent colonization of their time yet they describe themselves as 'weekend warriors' engaged in a metaphoric battle to overcome the pressures of life to enjoy their brief periods of "pure joy" in the air. The limited temporality of freedom seems to trigger the desire to carve out and use leisure time as effectively as possible and organize this free time as efficiently as possible. Hence pilots seemed to adopt an almost Taylorist approach to spending free time, applying many aspects more common to formal work in the achievement of these leisure goals. It became a sort of career in which they displayed behaviour that was in line with Whyte's description of organisational work:

> "To the managers and engineers who set the dominant tone in industry, purposelessness is anathema, and all their impulses incline them to highly planned, systematised development" (1963: 193).

While most people can learn to paraglide if they have both the financial and temporal capital, both novice and expert paragliders are always keen to learn more about weather conditions and other flying skills such as ‘thermalling’ and ‘ground handling’ – the advanced ability to manage the inflated wing without being in the air. These were skills that many pilots sought to learn through one-to-one coaching, flying holidays and talks and meeting at their local soaring clubs. In committing to such training and self-improvement, pilots displayed a strong sense of accomplishment which was expressed in their online forums, blogs, club newsletters and – more formally – in magazines like “Cross Country”.

World record holders – those pilots who had flown the farthest or the longest – would usually document their experiences in such places. These collective spaces provided a shared sub-cultural backdrop through which their own private accomplishments could be made public. It was here that an imagined community that involves only occasional face-to-face meetings between pilots became a community. The community enabled them to express their achievements and the desire to push themselves (and each other) to fly faster, higher and further. So the sports-related achievement principle, *Citius – Altius– Fortius* (Faster – Higher – Stronger) was strongly in evidence in printed accounts of flying as well as in the meetings and talks at local clubs.

The majority of pilots undertook specific training to have the required level of skills and knowledge to fly (www.bhpa.co.uk) and having experience or “air time” was a signifier of enhanced social capital in that community. Thus, their leisure time became a period of labour too in which they attempted to insert rigid, artificial divisions between their work, family and flying selves. This work of categorization served as a means by which they felt able to control their work-family – pilot identities and to advance towards their ‘dreams’ of flying like a god.

Serious leisure

In speaking to pilots, clear distinctions appeared (and then sometimes disappeared) between work and play. Paragliding was deemed a symbolic and practical locus for the pilots' need to be free of 'earthly' constraint. Yet our observations reinforced our view that the limited time they had available to enjoy paragliding had the tendency to turn play into its opposite, both for them and often the family whose own labours frequently enabled this temporal freedom to be carved out. So leisure became serious, structured and something to be 'managed'. This paradox is evidence that flying became an embodied – and highly technical – means by which play was used to segregate, define and refine working and playing identities.

The pilots we spoke to displayed six fundamental characteristics common to other serious leisure participants (Stebbins, 1996). These were observed and hinted by respondents as the need to persevere, the treatment of the sport as a sort of 'career', the desire for extensive skill, knowledge and experience, personal benefits such as self-enrichment and reflexivity, a need to connect with the broader community of paragliding and lastly, to build an identity that placed them hierarchically within that specialized community (Stebbins, 1996: 46). Both athletes and pursuers of serious leisure conform to this paradigm in their apparent desire to become faster and stronger and to achieve higher athletic goals. By buying into such achievement principles, pilots adopt the values of modern sport and – in doing so – turn away from casual leisure to serious leisure. Through their association with both the ideals of achievement – and through their expressions of those achievements online and in print - pilots were strongly connected to the norms, values and beliefs of a much broader and international paragliding sub-culture. This is how they identify with their avocation. They embed and structure their flying identity by adopting the characteristics of serious leisure and, of course, by seeking out spaces and times of what they termed 'freedom' from work, family life and their derivatives.

This means that play through paragliding is not purely autotelic and does not represent the unstructured and individualistic elements through which total freedom from societal ties might otherwise be conceived. On the contrary, even though paragliding apparently affords more freedom than (what we consider to be) more formal forms of work, the traces and frameworks of social structure are consistently present in paragliders' articulations of how life really is. By virtue of the overarching pressures of being Homo Faber, pilots – as self-styled "weekend warriors" - endeavour to structure their Homo Ludens self and use their play-time with work-like efficiency. This implies the imagined significance – if not the physical existence - of social structures.

The data we collected from these respondents shows that even though pilots do not blame work for their lack of air time, the organizational demands for bodily and emotional commitment are apparently lodged in the deepest consciousness of these actors; expressed through the language of achievement, perseverance and not least, time management. This is evidence that the discourses and values that actors make use of at work seep into and inform the private emotional world when they are at play (Zizek, 2010). So while we reject the traditional assumption that structures inform and construct *all* aspects of daily life at the micro-level, it seems from our fieldwork and interviews that pilots have largely and subconsciously submitted to the idea that social structures do exist; and not only that they exist but that they exert a powerful influence over them. This is why they design and negotiate methods for practically and symbolically getting *away* from them while simultaneously relying upon traditional discourses of work to structure their brief periods of play.

Concluding discussion

Whether inside or outside of organized forms of 'work' homo faber has not yet receded from his privileged place in the structured, ordered and even playful spaces where we live our lives. This means that brief periods of play-time continue to be associated with childish (often distinctively masculine) and selfish

forms of freedom from responsibility. Many studies have attempted to draw out the tensions and problems of modern work routines in their impacts upon the family and leisure time (Everingham et al., 2007) and have often tried to suggest new policies and practices to make work more appealing. The idea of the 'family-friendly' organization, for example, focuses on the ways in which parents might 'juggle' their time better between their children and their employers (Bratton and Gold, 2003; Maxwell and McDougall, 2004; Nadeem and Metcalfe, 2007).

Yet much of this (albeit well-intentioned) policy work and scholarship has had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing the traditional dichotomy between work and (the rest of) life as though they are entirely separate aspects of the human experience. This is unhelpful and – as our findings show – does not capture or evoke the 'mess' that is involved with human meaning-making whether at work or play; or even working *at* play. Traditional sociological approaches to the study of work and 'self' have focussed too heavily upon a sterile distinction between work and play, and the presupposition that workers get only brief opportunities to 'be themselves'. Our argument is that categories between work and home, the organizational actor and the inner-self no longer map cleanly or accurately onto our contemporary lived experience of work or leisure (Warhurst et al 2008).

We reject the idea that we 'bring' our true selves with us to work just as we reject the idea that we keep that true self hidden beneath a (sometimes paper-thin) veneer of organizational respectability. We do not seek to iron out the complexities of social behaviour by making a clear distinction between work and play so we argue that there are no true selves, only the periodic and temporary attachments to certain repertoires of meaning which come into and go out of use at certain times. None of these ever represent the 'true' person in entirety. Our main aim here has been to show *how* this works in practice; not through traditional organizational research to look for spaces of playfulness within the organizational routine, but instead via ethnographic investigation of people at play to see how they reflect back upon – and even utilize - elements of work, whatever work means for them.

Consequently, we argue, what paragliders experience as freedom during their moments of playfulness continues to be influenced and assembled through tacit forms of a distinctive labour process. So perhaps the desired freedom of Homo Ludens is never achievable – in its purest value-free essence – although it is performed, experienced and embodied both physically and emotionally when pilots are engaged in flying (and even thinking about or waiting to fly.) The participant observation of these behavioural signs sheds light on the representational, practical and emotional labours that actually go in to the crafting of leisure time.

In line with current thinking about identity construction, we do not seek to evaluate whether the work self or the play self is most true, assuming like many traditional accounts that the most playful is closest to the 'real self'; only allowed to emerge at certain times and in certain *sub rosa* spaces. Instead we contend that play only exists at all because actors may conceive of the – practical or imagined – work that they are escaping from; work that varies dramatically between individual pilots and yet is often conceived by a collective assumption that it is the *opposite* of play. We are not arguing here that freedom is an outright illusion then, but that autonomy – whatever that means to an individual pilot - is made real through active forms of subjective play that rely upon semiotic relationships with the idea of 'work' be it formal, organizational or domestic in nature (Baudrillard, 1968 and 1993b).

We argue that this semiotic relationality points to a paradox. If paragliding – and indeed any form of recreational sport - is to be treated as play at all it demands a signifier-sign relationship with the idea of social structure to develop its own distinctiveness. We have shown that this relationship is neither clear-cut nor obvious. In other words, by playing we must also refer to its supposed opposite - work. We have shown that for some paraglider pilots play means an apparent absence of formal 'work' and/or domestic duty, while at other times it means to partake seriously in leisure. Whatever the idea of play involves for individual

actors, it also rests upon traditional assumptions that social structures are waiting ‘behind the scenes’ to entrap us once again.

Yet what constitutes ‘work’ (and how that relates to ‘structure’) is not easily defined; and while it might refer to practical routines and repertoires of doing labour, things that might physically keep a pilot away from the hill-side, it might just as easily refer to the unseen commercialization of private and hidden emotions that are carried around imperceptibly through the ‘managed heart’ or in other invisible ways (Hochschild, 2003; Land and Taylor, 2010; Rhodes and Pullen, 2009). How, then, might paragliders *know* when they are or are not working? Or when they have broken free of social structures and regimes of various sorts? Is it enough that formal programmes, rules, codes or routines of work are *absent* to produce the feeling of leisure being *present*? In other words how do pilots really know that they are freely playing?

A response to such questions hinges upon philosophical questions of cognition, reflection and epistemology. They are issues which change the ways in which we think through both the nature of play and resistance in organizations, as well as the nature and meaning of leisure time outside of them. We may only treat paragliding as a temporal niche from which to ‘escape’ work, and indeed a variety of macro-structures, if we accept that those structures control, manipulate and interfere with our true selves in some way. So paragliding installs the sense that control is being exerted by societal determinants at the same time that it provides a (highly) technical means for an actor to take flight from those determinants. This philosophical co-dependency between the idea of what constitutes labour and leisure provokes some interesting sociological questions; not least because if we must conceive of ‘structure’ to conceive of ‘freedom’, are we not creating and re-inscribing those very phenomena? Does this mean that pilots behave as cultural ‘dupes’ when they work at play? Indeed, is the experience of freedom *ever* truly realizable through playfulness?

To begin to consider some possible answers to these questions we rely upon the assumption that there is no such thing as absolute freedom or absolute structure (Bauman, 1988) – only subjective, shifting and temporally brief experiences that create the sense of their existences. But this is not as relativistic as it first sounds. We propose that free play is – somewhat paradoxically - brought into existence through forms of serious leisure. This means that autonomy, heroism or masculinity might be constructed by the doing of paragliding, just as the social structure and its controls can also be subjectively lived and experienced by actors; experiences that rely largely upon human – rather than objective – meaning-making and identity work. Thus paragliders say that they are able to experience free play when they are flying – and even when they are not – because they attach themselves to a virtual (if not physical) collective of things, values, meanings and, of course, a community of like-minded pilots. So freedom is lived, experienced and actively *created* (in a Kafka-esque sense) when actors fly or even when they read or daydream about flying (Kafka, 1988).

On this basis we argue for a more subtle understanding of how the identity of paragliders really works; after all the findings of this field research show that 'Homo Ludens' does not simply die off when 'Homo Faber' goes to work despite the paragliders' claims to the contrary. In fact, the boundaries between such apparently different 'selves' are by no means dichotomous or easily divided. Identity is about 'who we are' but it also concerns how others see us, as much as it also concerns how we present ourselves whether in a domestic, organizational or more playful setting such as a paragliding club. We critique the 'worn-out assumption' of identity formation, which presumes that the spatio-cultural transition of the self is a linear process of integration and acceptance (Fortier, 2000). Instead of seeing identity as a monolithic entity each individual 'owns' throughout the course of their life, this approach points to the multiple identities that an individual has at any time, whether they are working or playing, playing at work or working at playing.

Our argument points to the contextual nature of such identities to argue that homos faber and ludens – and the many varied 'homos' in between - are manufactured

through interaction at a local level in different contexts. Thus, while paragliding pilots may well see themselves as business professionals whilst at work, they also embody other roles – father, brother, friend, pilot and so on – at other times. These roles overlap and interfere with each other, coming into play at different times even if they are momentarily forgotten in the course of playful flight. Yet none of these role identities fully *disappear* when they are not in actual 'use', instead a different identity (and with it a different set of values, norms and discourses) gets privileged over or even blended with the others. It is a form of serious leisure – a form of labour – which turns play into work and work into play.

In this 'mess' of pluralised identities, temporal and spatial happenings are the key through which the paraglider's playful identity is crystallised and enjoys distinction. In the specialized career of the paraglider it is important to work at becoming a 'sky god'. Gods, of course, need not concern themselves with earthly routines, domestic labour or commercial exchange (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). In flying above the world – albeit briefly – these pilots feel they have a creative power to free themselves from precisely these limitations. Yet these are not gods but men; physical, vulnerable and fleshy bodies that rely upon work – of various sorts and by various actors – for this distinctive experience of playing in the air.

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