

Aimed toward alienated youth, *Hunting, Gathering, & Videogames* explains why we have to work (tracing the common link between the workday of prehistory's hunter-gatherer and today's videogame programmer), and offers a guideline for an alternative measure of "success."

Hunting, Gathering, & Videogames

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Hunting, Gathering, & Videogames

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1. Hunting, Gathering, & Videogames: the historical path of obtaining food, clothing and shelter

If we went back in time to live in the age of our prehistoric hunting and gathering ancestors, we would *still* have to go to work. For our food we'd have to hunt wild animals and gather plantlife, for protection from the climate we'd have to make clothing, and for shelter we'd need to build some kind of housing. An advantage to this way of life is that there would be no questions in our minds about why we were working: we would know it was about survival. A disadvantage is that most of us would not live very well—we'd have homes without heat, plumbing, or refrigerators; we'd have to deal with hungry cougars and mosquitoes without having the protection of rifles and insect repellent; and the threat of starvation would always lurk, particularly in the winter. But our early ancestors were unlikely to have felt deprived by the lack of such comforts, as they knew no lifestyle other than their own. So why the move from that straightforward “workday” to our current confusing world of office cubicles, rush hour train commutes, and stock market peaks and crashes?

The monumental step that took the human race away from the hunting and gathering life and into the age of agriculture, writes anthropologist Jared Diamond in *The Third Chimpanzee*, was probably accidental: discarded seeds were “planted” around home base, and people gradually began to notice the advantage of having some control over their food supply. Now, intentional planting might not be particularly important if you happened to live in an area where food was already plentiful. When a twentieth century hunter and gatherer of the Kalahari Desert Bushmen was once asked why his tribe didn't plant crops, he replied, “Why should we plant, when there are so many mongongo nuts in the world?”ⁱ For those areas without plenty of mongongo nuts (figuratively speaking), however, agriculture offers the great advantage of improving the chances

ⁱ Jared Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee*, p. 184.

PART I: WHY DO WE HAVE TO WORK?

of securing your next meal. The same advantage explains the domestication of animals such as cows and sheep. This must have been a great motivating factor for people who, unlike most modern Americans, didn't take a food supply for granted.

If we had simply switched our workday from hunting and gathering to planting and herding, I would have no incentive to write this book. I wouldn't be concerned about my children ever asking me "Why do I have to work?"—the alternative of starvation would be obvious enough. But the purely practical developments of plant and animal domestication had repercussions that complicate the answer to this simple question.

Because agriculture is so much more efficient than hunting and gathering, it allows for great amounts of food to be produced by just a small segment of the population. This in turn allows others in the community to dedicate their lives to pursuits other than food collection. If it takes, say, only a quarter of the community to provide food for all the rest, the other three-quarters can then concentrate on a variety of specialized skills: tool making, astronomy, medicine, music, etc. The products of those specialized skills can then be traded for food. Agriculture, in other words, gives rise to specialists. It's agriculture's legacy that allowed the Mayans to create their calendar, scientists to develop vaccinations, and Nirvana to record *Nevermind*. Unlike the hunting and gathering days, a person's workday in an agricultural society might have nothing to do with directly providing his or her survival basics.

But if the agricultural system allows for just a small part of the population to provide the food, clothing and shelter for everyone else, then why does *everyone* have to work?

The answer is that we need either to create a product or to provide a service so we can engage in trade with the farmers, tailors, and shelter-builders (or shelter-renters, as the case may be). As self-interest is the motivating force behind almost every human action, it follows that nobody is going to put in the effort to harvest, sew, or build something and then let others just take it for free. If *we* were the farmers, would we put in all the extra hours necessary to create a surplus of crops if we weren't going to get anything in return? The ancient practice of barter is the logical next step once people become specialists.

Suppose you have only three people in a community. Suppose one person happens to excel at farming, another at carpentry, and the other at creating videogames. It's in the interest of each to specialize in his or her own area of expertise, produce a bit more than is personally needed, and then trade the surplus with the other two. This way all three will end up with good food, furniture, and videogames.¹

The answer to “Why do I have to work?” in a small agricultural community is still fairly clear-cut: either you work the land for your food, or you have some kind of specialized skill that creates a product that can be traded for food. (It's probably no coincidence that the word *trade* means both *occupation* and *to exchange*.)ⁱⁱ But the connection between the modern workday and obtaining our survival basics isn't quite as direct. When seeking employment today, we're not looking to “make things” so we can barter with farmers and other specialists; we're looking for jobs that will provide us with a steady supply of either green paper in our hands or electronic numbers in our bank accounts (as well as providing us with, we hope, some sort of personal fulfillment). Our labor of course *does* provide for our survival, because we exchange our green paper and bank account numbers for our groceries, clothes and rent ... but it all seems unnecessarily complicated. How and why did this happen?

The answer became clearer to me after reading Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave*, in which he explains how the transition from agriculture (or what Toffler calls the First Wave) to the Industrial Revolution (the Second Wave) contorted our once straightforward workday.

The First Wave (8000 B.C. – A.D. 1600s)

The adoption of agriculture marked man's first turning point, or first new way of life. In addition to creating specialists, agriculture also led people to stop wandering in pursuit of game, and instead stay rooted to their

ⁱⁱ None of the etymology dictionaries I checked specifically confirmed this, but one could argue that the link is implied by the chronology behind the word's different meanings—1546: the noun “one's business”; 1548: the verb form of that noun; 1555: “buying and selling”; late 1500s: “to exchange.” (Sources: *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories*, and the *Online Etymology Dictionary* at www.geocities.com/etymonline/index.html.)

land—thus the creation of villages. Wherever agriculture arose, what we call “civilization” took root, whether in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, or the Middle East. Despite cultural differences, there were similarities among all agricultural societies: divisions of labor, religions that became more or less organized, and some form of government. Depending on the degree to which labor could be specialized (details discussed in endnote 3), repercussions of the First Wave also included large populations, international trade, and accumulated knowledge through written records.²

The Second Wave (1700s–1950s)

The aftermaths of the First Wave led to the Second Wave, the Industrial Revolution. This second turning point in human history began with the invention of machines that could replace human and animal strength. Another part of the upheaval was the degree to which labor was divided. Rather than the First Wave method of a specialist making a complete product one at a time, the Second Wave method was to divide the production up among multiple workers. This is where the workday gets more complicated, and starts to look more like our own.

Take the making of pins. In a small agricultural community, there would be a specialist dedicated to making one pin at a time. In Adam Smith’s 1776 *The Wealth of Nations*, he describes the “new” pin-making process: “One man draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it, a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving the head ...”ⁱⁱⁱ Today’s corporations have a parallel arrangement: each employee contributes a small part to the larger task of producing a company’s product or service.

Why did this Second Wave occur—why would an agricultural society want to industrialize? After all, many of the changes associated with the Industrial Revolution are negative: pollution, ugly factories, mind-numbingly repetitive labor done by oppressed workers, rampant greed on the part of the factory owners, and destruction of the environment and traditional cultures. What motivated such a move?³

ⁱⁱⁱ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Chapter 1, “Of the Division of Labour.”

Industry's emergence may have been a "revolution," but what drove it was similar to what drove our distant human relatives some two million years earlier to sharpen their sticks and stones before going out to hunt. Sharpened weapons got the job done more reliably, so those capable of making such tools were the most likely to survive long enough to produce offspring. Likewise, planting did a more reliable job of securing food than did hunting and gathering, so those who adopted agriculture were the most likely to survive and reproduce. Survival also explains the adoption of industry: because goods produced via assembly lines and coal-powered machine strength were less expensive to make, they could be sold for less than handmade goods. To return to the change in the pin-making process—Adam Smith estimated that ten craftsmen, each making one pin at a time, would turn out a total of about 200 per day. Ten pin-factory workers each doing their own specialized task, however, could turn out over 48,000! So when it came to competition between the relatively expensive products from small shops vs. the inexpensive products from factories, it's no surprise that large industries had the greater "survival rate."

Car manufacturing provides another example of why the industrial methods, for better or worse, became widespread. In the beginning of the 1900s, automakers built the framework of their cars by having all the parts carried to a stationary assembly point, taking twelve and a half hours to finish the job. When Henry Ford started building cars using the assembly line method, the exact same job took only one and a half hours. As a result, Ford's cars were much more affordable than those of his competitors: Ford made it possible for the average person to own what was previously considered a luxury item. Just to keep their businesses alive, all other car manufacturers were forced to switch to using assembly lines as well.⁴

The Third Wave (1950s–today)

In today's age of information, our labor is so precisely divided and specialized that many workers never deal directly with, and indeed may never even *see*, their company's product. An American employee in today's pin-manufacturing company would probably be involved in

PART I: WHY DO WE HAVE TO WORK?

what's called "adding value" to the finished product, such as doing sales research (the actual pin-making is more likely to be done overseas where the labor is cheaper). There's of course much more to the computer age than just a refinement of the division of labor, but for the limited purposes of this chapter I'll go no further, and treat this Third Wave as only an extension of the Second.

This condensed history of our workday shows that the answer to the question "Why do I have to work?" is the same for the prehistoric hunter and gatherer, the first millennium B.C. farmer, the first century A.D. pottery-maker, the nineteenth century assembly line worker, and today's videogame programmer—each works to obtain food, clothing and shelter. The differences are only a matter of "how":

- the prehistoric method is by direct hunting, gathering, planting, sewing, and building;
- the First Wave method is by producing some good or providing some service that can be used for bartering (usually via currency, to be discussed in the next chapter) with herders, farmers, tailors, and carpenters;
- the Second/Third Wave method is by contributing to a *part* of the production of a good or service that can be traded (via currency) for the products that come from the food, clothing and shelter industries.

If we don't "go to work" by one of these three methods, our options for access to survival basics are unreliable,^{iv} or at the very least, unattractive: stealing, gambling, begging, scavenging, or being dependent on family members, friends, or the government (welfare). These frequently have consequences that tend to run contrary to personal happiness: jail, hunger, poverty, and strained relationships with resentful friends and family.⁵

^{iv} Exceptions are those who've accumulated or inherited enough money to live off the interest—but such people are rare, and unlikely to be part of this book's audience.

In the tribal love-rock musical *Hair*, the hippie leader Berger rejects the idea of needing a job, and sees no reason why he can't spend his life hanging out in the park, singing songs, taking drugs, and traveling with friends. But although he sees no reason why *he* should have to work, he apparently still wants *other* people to work, because he still wants the products of their labor: prepared food, clothing, drugs, and a car with a full tank of gas. His idea of freedom from work is hardly revolutionary—that kind of self-centered logic is embraced by every 3-year-old. Unless he can justify the position of “other people should labor to create things for me, and I shouldn't have to give them anything in return,” his shunning of work just shows his confusion about our modern workday.

Of course, it may be that Berger is just a lazy freeloader. But even if that's the case, I believe that his type of attitude would be less common if our labor and our immediate survival were more directly linked. For suppose we were transported back in time several centuries, and to an area where we had to tend the crops for our food and build our own log cabins for shelter. If Berger were there, would he still feel justified in spending half his waking day playing in the woods, and spending the other half asking neighbors for food and shelter—figuring it's “only fair” since everyone else has so much, and he has so little? My guess is that he would not. Yet those who are inattentive to income in today's world are similar to those of yesteryear who were inattentive toward laboring for their food, clothing and shelter: the only difference is the roundabout route our labor now takes.

...

The adult world assumes that the answer to “Why do I have to work?” is obvious, and young people who question our system are more likely to be brushed off than given an accurate and satisfying explanation. I recently read the original story of *Pinocchio* to my children, and was struck by how little empathy Pinocchio's elders had for his naiveté—a naiveté that should have been expected from a dependent who had been alive for only a few days. Consider the following dialogue between Pinocchio and the Talking Cricket:

PART I: WHY DO WE HAVE TO WORK?

"I will not go," answered the Cricket, "until I have told you a great truth."

"Tell it to me then, and be quick about it."

"Woe to those boys who rebel against their parents, and run away capriciously from home. They will never come to any good in the world, and sooner or later they will repent bitterly."

"Sing away, Cricket, as you please, and as long as you please. For me, I have made up my mind to run away tomorrow at daybreak, because if I remain I shall not escape the fate of all other boys. I shall be sent to school and shall be made to study either by love or by force. To tell you in confidence, I have no wish to learn; it is much more amusing to run after butterflies, or to climb trees and to take the young birds out of their nests."

"Poor little goose! Do you not know that in that way you will grow up a perfect donkey, and that everyone will make game of you?"

"Hold your tongue, you wicked ill-omened croaker!" shouted Pinocchio.

But the Cricket, who was patient and philosophical, instead of becoming angry at this impertinence, continued in the same tone: "If you do not wish to go to school, why not at least learn a trade, if only to enable you to earn honestly a piece of bread."

"Do you want me to tell you?" replied Pinocchio, who was beginning to lose patience. "Among all the trades in the world there is only one that really takes my fancy."

"And that trade—what is it?"

"It is to eat, drink, sleep, and amuse myself, and to lead a vagabond life from morning to night."

"As a rule," said the Talking Cricket with the same composure, "all those who follow that trade almost always end either in a hospital or in prison."

"Take care, you wicked ill-omened croaker! Woe to you if I fly into a passion!"^v

[A few more words are exchanged, and the conversation ends abruptly after Pinocchio throws a hammer at the Talking Cricket, flattening him against the wall.]

^v Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio*, Chapter 4.

The story is trying to provide a moral lesson about the foolishness of vagabond youth, but all I could notice is what a poor job the Talking Cricket does at explaining why one has to work. The Cricket is described as being patient and philosophical, and promises to tell Pinocchio a “great truth” ... but then just gives the vague warning of “woe to boys who rebel—they never come to any good.” The Cricket *begins* to give a valid explanation when he suggests that Pinocchio learn a trade, yet he doesn’t follow through with reasons that Pinocchio can understand: the Cricket’s words have to be taken on faith alone. Pinocchio’s stance, on the other hand, is at least based on his real-life experience. And based on his limited and sheltered experience of “being a vagabond = fun” and “work and school = not fun,” his stance makes perfect sense! What Pinocchio needed was for the Talking Cricket to explain, without overtones of haughtiness, the specific drawback behind a sole focus on immediate pleasure: the lack of a reliable food supply when you haven’t yet learned the skills to hunt or grow or trade for it. Pinocchio needed the Talking Cricket to patiently explain why “eating, drinking, sleeping, and amusing oneself” cannot be considered a trade. (*What* is he “trading,” and with whom?)

It may be that Pinocchio had to learn the hard way. Maybe he could learn only by experiencing such a ravenous gnawing in his stomach that he ends up scavenging for bones discarded by dogs and for moldy pudding left in trashcans, all the while repeating his cry, “Oh! What a dreadful illness hunger is!” Certainly it makes for a better story. But in real life, self-interest dictates that we try our best to avoid unnecessary misery. And Pinocchio’s period of starvation and the Talking Cricket’s death (as well as other violent conflicts in Pinocchio’s life) could have had a better chance of being avoided had Pinocchio received an explanation that had empathy for a person new to the world. An explanation that went beyond “be a good boy because I said so.”

Aimed toward alienated youth, *Hunting, Gathering, & Videogames* explains why we have to work (tracing the common link between the workday of prehistory's hunter-gatherer and today's videogame programmer), and offers a guideline for an alternative measure of "success."

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