



Article

Is Fun a Matter of Grammar?

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This paper outlines an analysis of the word ‘fun’, as it is used in everyday English sentences to describe various activities and asks why some things are labeled as fun while others seem unable to be properly described as such. One common unspoken idea, for example, is that a fun activity is deemed fun due to having a particular phenomenology, in a way that might be comparable to being in a ‘flow state’. Due to the trouble such psychological accounts of fun have in explaining both the precise conditions of fun and also why some activities are thought to be enjoyable but not fun, a deflationary theory is instead introduced. This proposed alternative account suggests that the use of the word ‘fun’, when describing activities in English sentences, signals that the sentence is a generic sentence, an idea based on a semantic distinction made by Greg Carlson (1989). Further, it is argued that the words ‘pleasurable’ and ‘enjoyable’ are reserved for non-generic sentences, leaving the use of the word ‘fun’ to signal something akin to a grammar relation, rather than referring to a feeling or psychological state.

Keywords: fun, enjoyable, pleasure, semantics, philosophy of language

Theories of fun—be they descriptive projects outlining the reasons we call some activities ‘fun’, or analytic projects uncovering the kind of conditions that make an activity fun—are lacking and rarely attempted in academic literature, largely because uses of the word ‘fun’ are often conflated with other terms such as ‘pleasure’ and ‘enjoyment’ (see Blythe and Hassenzahl 2003 for a discussion of this). The word ‘fun’ in its everyday folk sense refers to something that is almost universally cited as a principle of good game design, however fun is, more often than not, left to implicit assumption rather than explicit theory. One such common, although rarely stated, assumption is that being engaged in an activity described by people as ‘fun’ involves being in a particular phenomenal or psychological state. Due to the trouble existing accounts have in explaining the conditions of this state, I will introduce what can be seen as a deflationary account of fun, based on a grammar-like distinction.

It should be noted that analytic philosophy has a paucity of writings surrounding the use of the word ‘fun’, even in the literature on games where one might imagine a precise understanding could be useful in game design or for those writing about games. One reason for the lack of literature is that the term ‘fun’ is often lumped in with its cousins—‘enjoyment’, ‘play’, and ‘leisure’—when, arguably, it has its own specific character.

Whether or not there truly is a principle that underlies fun, the attempt in this paper will first be to investigate, and clarify, the limited literature on the use of the word ‘fun’, a useful endeavor for those with a professional interest in games.

In the second half of the paper, I will introduce the idea that the scholarship of fun has struggled due to the implicit assumption that the word ‘fun’ refers to a specific psychological experience, or phenomenology. I will instead argue for an account that suggests fun does not exist as a feeling, but instead that the word ‘fun’, when describing different activities, is a marker for so-called generic sentences following an understanding from Greg Carlson (1989). Further I claim the words ‘pleasurable’ or ‘enjoyable’ are generally only used in non-generic sentences, leaving the use of the word ‘fun’ to signal something like a grammar relation rather than referring to a specific psychological state.

The Lack of Literature on Fun

Fun is often claimed to be a basic need of human life (Monk 2002). While this is no doubt true, the subject of fun as a distinct topic of research—as opposed to the study of activities that can be described as fun—is surprisingly uncommon. Instead, analyses of fun are often eschewed in favor of analyses putting the emphasis on terms like ‘leisure’, ‘play’ or ‘enjoyment’. We see by the 1980s it true to say that fun had been largely ignored in academia: “Writers, researchers, educators, and philosophers seem to have skirted the word ‘Fun’ or avoided its use altogether, while fairly commonly using the word ‘play.’” (Slaughter 1983).

Surprisingly little has changed even now, as noted by Ben Fincham (2016) who wrote that there was a “lack of literature specifically on fun” (32) when it came time for his sociological treatment of the topic. Those who have considered the concept of fun usually acknowledge it as being a pleasure yet conceptually distinct to either pleasure or happiness (Fincham 2016). Fun is often seen as being either too broad, or too vague, a concept to be useful, such as when Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) paraphrase LeBlanc: “[Fun] is merely a stand-in term for a more complex phenomenon that no one really understands” (§25).

We know early conceptions saw fun as subordinate to leisure (see de Grazia 1962, Trafton 1985, Pieper [1963] 2009) but apart from isolated mentions, it seems, for the longest time fun was neglected as an object of serious academic interest. Johan Huizinga, perhaps the earliest voice on fun in serious scholarship, saw the concept as an element of play, along with “mirth” and “tension” (Huizinga [1938] 2003). He was skeptical, however, that there could be a precise understanding of fun, writing: “this [...] element, *the fun of playing*, resists all analysis, all logical interpretations. As a concept it cannot be reduced to any other mental category” (3, emphasis mine).

Special mention must be given to the more recent writings on fun in the digital realm, specifically the field known as Human-Computer Interaction (or HCI). Those interested in HCI have a particular stake in making digital experiences enjoyable, be those experiences games, apps (including gamified apps), programs, websites or other online content. Works such as the anthology *Funology: From Usability to Enjoyment* (2003) are aimed at this space, looking at practicalities of program design, as well as the underlying philosophical issues around creating enjoyable digital experiences. I am careful to use the term ‘enjoyable’ here because, despite the title of *Funology*, the concept of fun (i.e., fun specifically) is almost entirely overlooked in this particular work. The more common expression found in this anthology is ‘enjoyment’, which I argue is not synonymous with fun. This is not to say the term ‘fun’ doesn’t get a run in *Funology*, it would be misleading to suggest the term is not used liberally throughout the book. However, most writers appearing in the anthology seem to use ‘fun’ with less than laser-like precision, its use apparently interchangeable with ‘enjoyable’ or ‘pleasing’ in the text. When the term ‘fun’ is being used with precision it tends to be as a technical use, rather than describing an everyday term (see for example Reed 2003). As a result, very little of HCI generally—and the book *Funology* in particular—is as relevant as might be expected for our current treatment, which aims to be a descriptive look at a folk concept.

The obvious exception to this lack of analysis of fun in *Funology* is the chapter by Mark Blythe and Marc Hassenzahl (2003) titled ‘The Semantics of Fun: Differentiating Enjoyable Experiences’. I will return to Blythe and Hassenzahl shortly, seeing as their analysis is one of the few in the space of semantic difference between the term ‘fun’ and similar terms: ‘enjoyment’, ‘pleasure’ and ‘play’. Firstly, however, I want to investigate whether the variable that provokes a description of an activity as being ‘fun’ could be related to views on how moral the activity is seen to be.

The Morality of Fun

The relationship between morality and fun has been noted across the literature, in particular by Sebastian de Grazia (1962) who tells us that fun is amoral and apolitical, perhaps echoing Huizinga ([1938] 2003) and his thoughts that game playing occurs outside normal life, including moral and political life. Another idea, as noted by Walter Podilchak (1991) is that fun is regularly seen as a morally lesser form of pleasure and that many “relegate to fun all socially or morally “inferior” forms of free-time interactions—whether it be drinking, informal get-togethers, “doing nothing” and fooling around, or sexual activity” (134). Could the morality of fun be the defining characteristic of the concept?

As Fincham (2016) highlights in his analysis of the term, there is an almost-paradox when it comes to fun. Fun is seen as idleness and wasting time, thus having strong negative connotations, but “[at] the same time it is something we crave and want to be

associated with” (10). Fincham makes use of Martha Wolfenstein’s (1951) pioneering work on the historic context of fun to explain the seeming contradiction.

For Wolfenstein, writing in the 1950s, there was a transformation in the way people saw fun in a post-war world, especially in the United States. Play, but also fun, was seen in a negative light in pre-war America according to Wolfenstein (1951). The concept of play in particular was seen by those before the 1940s as coming from a place of “unhealthy excitement and nervous debilitation” (20). The physicality of play in post-war America however, mirrored imaginings of soldiers and other heroic figures, especially for children. As Fincham writes, Wolfenstein saw play become about, in her words, “muscular development, necessary strength and control” (20).

Fun and play then transformed from something to be avoided to an imperative for children, and by association the parents—especially mothers—as part of a healthy upbringing: “Instead of feeling guilty for having too much fun, one is inclined to feel ashamed if one does not have enough” (15). This had further implications for the way we see ourselves in relation to fun: being a fun person was something to be admired and to present to the outside world as part of a well-rounded personality.

For Fincham (2016) there is a direct line to be drawn from this development to the twenty-first century rise of social media and ‘selfie’ culture:

People, particularly young people, tend to post images of themselves having fun on holiday, fun in the bar, fun on the beach, fun with friends, fun by themselves, fun in the shops, fun in the café and fun everywhere. The same pressure, described by Wolfenstein in the 1950s, is alive and kicking here in the twenty-first century (11)

Fincham goes on to describe the fact that there are real world consequences of not appearing to be fun. In particular he cites research (Hinton-Smith and Fincham 2016, cited in Fincham 2016, 11) about career progression being hampered if you are not seen as fun, something particularly true of women. It seems, then, that fun is somewhere in between the trivial and the very serious in contemporary society, a development that we can trace back to Wolfenstein’s observations about the change after the 1940s.

Although there seems to be some correlation between a lack of concern for morals and fun, it is not as simple as to suggest that fun is simply pleasure without morals. For one, we have seen that over the twentieth century that fun has often shed its immoral connotations, leaving doubt as to whether morality was ever the defining characteristic of the concept. Amoral pleasure, for example, seems often to have little to do with fun. For instance, eating delicious foods appears to be largely amoral (although rarely immoral), yet eating, I would argue, seems only in rare circumstances to be described as ‘fun’. This alone points to the fact that there must be other variables in play. Even if morality were key to fun, though, there has been no explicit theory, to my knowledge, about why some

things are considered fun—and others not—that run along moral lines. It is more usual, in fact, to appeal to the feeling of fun activities rather than their social standing.

Fun and Flow

The position that fun is a specific feeling or flavor of pleasure, although rarely made explicit, seems to be the default in contemporary writings. In particular, a standard account would suggest that there is a flavor to the psychological experience or phenomenology of certain pleasures that lends themselves to being described as ‘fun’. Seeing as this ‘flavor’ has been difficult to describe, I think we can afford to be skeptical of this position and I will introduce my alternative take a little later. I suggest that if fun did have psychological underpinnings, however, it would look a lot like ‘flow’.

Since the 1970s, the term ‘flow’ has been understood to refer to a subjective state that occurs during activity finely balanced between challenge and skill (Csikszentmihalyi [1990] 2008). The key text in this field is the 1990 book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, which introduces the concept for a popular audience as well as spelling out insights for specialists in the field. Although Csikszentmihalyi coined the term ‘flow’ for the absorbing feeling of being lost in an activity, he can’t be said to have invented the concept. Groos (1901) and Bühler ([1930] 2013), for example, are cited by Csikszentmihalyi as describing what came to be known as ‘Funktionslust’ (literally ‘activity pleasure’) early in the twentieth century. It was, however, Csikszentmihalyi who precisely outlined the conditions for flow as part of the positive psychology movement that began to gain popularity in the last decades of the twentieth century.

For Csikszentmihalyi, flow has the following hallmarks (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2014):

- Deep concentration on the here and now
- A merging of action and the feeling of awareness
- Loss of ‘reflective self-consciousness’
- A sense that you can control your own actions and know how to deal with the activity at hand
- Distortion of time (e.g., that time has gone faster than normal)
- Feeling that the activity is intrinsically rewarding (240)

Although flow was initially studied in terms of what is known as ‘autotelic’ activities such as rock climbing, playing games and painting (i.e., activities that are seemingly valued for their own sake), Csikszentmihalyi tells us that in principle one can achieve flow in any activity. It is rather the state of consciousness (‘merging of action and

awareness’) that determines flow, not a matter of whether the action actually achieves an outcome or not. It is thus, for example, possible, and even common, to experience flow in a work scenario. This is one hint that flow is not precisely synonymous with fun, seeing as working appears to be only rarely fun in the usual sense.

Although, as the subtitle of the book suggests, Csikszentmihalyi sees flow as ‘optimal’, there is some hesitation in describing flow as a type of pleasure. Csikszentmihalyi instead claimed that flow fits into a different category, one that “deserves a separate name” (46) which he calls ‘enjoyment’. This term ‘enjoyment’ appears to be used somewhat interchangeably with ‘flow’ in Csikszentmihalyi’s work, characterized by what he called “forward movement” (46) or experience that needs and builds skills. Despite protestations to the contrary, it must be said that Csikszentmihalyi’s constant reference to optimal experience when talking of flow (and even the use of the word ‘enjoyment’) leads us to a natural assumption that flow is, at least in some sense, pleasurable. Indeed, it would be hard to think of why people would pursue flow-producing experiences—such as playing games and rock climbing—having, as they do, potentially no other ends than pleasurable ones.

However, just as pleasure free from morals doesn’t appear to be quite the same as ‘fun’ (as we saw earlier), flow doesn’t quite seem the same as fun either. Blythe and Hassenzahl (2003) when writing about their theory of fun, in fact, use the deep concentration of flow to contrast with the more trivial pursuits of fun rather than use them as a synonym. Blythe and Hassenzahl set up pairs of terms—triviality/relevance, spectacle/aesthetics, repetition/progression, and transgression/commitment—as ways of understanding the difference between their use of ‘fun’ (or distraction) on one hand and ‘pleasure’ (or absorption) on the other.

Helpfully, Blythe and Hassenzahl explicitly cite their absorbing ‘pleasure’, as being related to the absorbing flow states cited by Csikszentmihalyi, contrasting them to their understanding of ‘fun’. Blythe and Hassenzahl want to say that things that put us in flow, such as painting or playing sports, are these types of ‘pleasures’ and not what they would call fun, which they see as a more distracted type of experience. For example, they place watching science fiction films and listening to pop music in the triviality/spectacle/repetition/transgression end of the spectrum as fun, in opposition to the flow-like ‘pleasure’ they are talking about.

Although many would disagree with the view that sports being flow-producing bars them from being considered fun¹, writers such as Koster (2005) also agree that ‘fun’ and ‘flow’ are not quite synonymous. Flow, for example, is often described as fun, but not all

¹There is evidence that Blythe and Hassenzahl’s ‘fun’ is a technical usage so I wouldn’t want to claim that they hold the position that playing sports couldn’t be fun in a folk sense.

things we would call ‘fun’ come from being in flow. Watching a comedy show on television, say, can be fun but wouldn’t usually put one in flow, at least according to Csikszentmihalyi (30). Perhaps, too, not all flow is fun: there are a few examples (such as flow states during work) that most people would not usually call ‘fun’. It must be said that Privette contradicts this view (see Privette 1983), believing that flow is (always) fun, including flow states achieved at work, when writing in the early 1980s. Perhaps survey data might be needed to confirm the intuition, but this flow from working—at a job, say—seems, at least at times, an example of flow without being fun. This is surely true when it comes to fun understood by Fincham as being an alleviation of responsibility (Fincham 2016), one of the keys of his understanding of fun. It seems then, perhaps, more accurate to say flow is *very often* fun.

In some ways the concept of flow will be naturally much clearer than that of fun. This is because Csikszentmihalyi’s checklist indicates not only the conditions for flow but also what it feels like phenomenally. Indeed, this is precisely why flow is the preferred concept for those in HCI, circumventing the term ‘fun’ which, as we saw from both Huizinga, and Salen and Zimmerman’s critiques, is seen by many as too broad to study properly. Sorenson and Pasquier (2010), for instance, prefer to speak of flow than speak of fun, acknowledging that “the notion of fun is, without a doubt, incredibly broad, and it is debatable whether the search for a comprehensive definition could ever prove fruitful” (3). Admitting that flow is not quite the same as fun, it seems that, however, for the purposes of game design, that flow can be a useful stand-in. Sorenson and Pasquier, for instance, cite Koster and his idea that “fun is the act of mastering a problem mentally” (Koster 2005, 90) to show us that provoking flow can make games fun.

Salen and Zimmerman (2003) also want to say that fun is a desired goal for digital games but that, once again, fun is a less useful concept than flow. About fun, they insist “[this] term does make some sense. Good games are fun. Fun games are what players want. A fun game makes for a pleasurable experience, which is why people play them” (§25). However, they almost immediately all but give up on further analysis of fun, endorsing Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek’s (2004) desire to move away from talk of fun and drill down on precisely what is causing the pleasure. Like Pasquier and Sorenson, they make the move, instead, when writing on pleasure from video games, of turning to flow.

When dropping the elusive topic of fun in favor of the more pragmatic concept of flow, Salen and Zimmerman seem to echo Koster, and Pasquier and Sorenson’s contentions that flow is not precisely fun. They also acknowledge that flow is not a game-specific concept but do highlight how good games tend to place one in flow. Sadly however, once again, fun itself is given short shrift, seen as less useful than the more easily analyzed concept of flow, more evidence that fun and flow are not perfect synonyms.

Fun as a Grammar-like Distinction

If fun does not have a phenomenological analogue like flow, then maybe fun is not a distinct feeling but, rather, a quirk of language? Perhaps there is something about the language used to describe certain activities that tends to see those activities being described as ‘fun’? If so, maybe by investigating English sentences about fun we can begin to understand the concept. This necessarily makes the investigation into the use of the word ‘fun’ a descriptive one rather prescriptive or normative. By this I mean that, as suggested earlier, we are tracking everyday use of the word, which can then, perhaps, inform more precise use by game theorists and philosophers, rather than arriving at a prescriptive or technical use.

Regional differences and colloquial uses may mean the reader’s intuitions of the following sentences might differ to the author’s, however I have attempted to use relatively uncontroversial examples of things that are fun and things that are not. I trust that if one does not sign off on every example that the thrust of the point remains intact. Although not universally found to be fun I suggest it would not be unusual to see the following English sentences about activities:

- (1) Listening to pop music is fun.
- (2) Watching action movies is fun.
- (3) Playing board games is fun.
- (4) Going to a concert is fun.
- (5) Eating dinner with friends is fun.
- (6) Drinking coffee with friends is fun.
- (7) Watching television is fun.
- (8) Going to the movies is fun.
- (9) Playing *World of Warcraft* is fun.

I suggest all these activities are also able to be described as ‘pleasurable’ or ‘enjoyable’:

- (1a) Listening to pop music is enjoyable.
- (2a) Watching action movies is enjoyable.

- (3a) Playing board games is enjoyable.
- (4a) Going to a concert is enjoyable.
- (5a) Eating dinner with friends is enjoyable.
- (6a) Drinking coffee with friends is enjoyable.
- (7a) Watching television is enjoyable.
- (8a) Going to the movies is enjoyable.
- (9a) Playing *World of Warcraft* is enjoyable.

Things that, to me, seem rarely described as fun (although potentially described as ‘enjoyable’ or ‘pleasurable’) would be the following, as highlighted by what I suggest to be somewhat unusual sentences for native speakers to use:

- (10) Working is fun. [?]
- (11) Living is fun. [?]
- (12) Eating is fun. [?]
- (13) Eating chocolate is fun. [?]
- (14) Having a massage is fun. [?]
- (15) Having a good breakfast is fun. [?]
- (16) Drinking coffee is fun. [?]
- (17) Drinking chocolate milk is fun. [?]
- (18) Writing books is fun. [?]

Their counterparts, I argue, are much more usual:

- (10a) Working is enjoyable.
- (11a) Living is enjoyable.
- (12a) Eating is enjoyable.
- (13a) Eating chocolate is enjoyable.
- (14a) Having a massage is enjoyable.

(15a) Having a good breakfast is enjoyable.

(16a) Drinking coffee is enjoyable.

(17a) Drinking chocolate milk is enjoyable.

(18a) Writing books is enjoyable.

I suggest that the difference between (1-9) and (10-18) is that the first set (1-9) have what I am calling *generic* and *non-generic* readings, while the second (10-18) only have non-generic readings as based on a semantic distinction as understood by Carlson (1989). If true, then it may be the case that ‘fun’ helps the reader determine if the sentence is a generic sentence (in addition to alerting the reader that the activity is pleasing) while ‘pleasurable’ and ‘enjoyable’ do the same but for non-generic sentences. In other words, I think it likely that the choice of the word ‘fun’ shows us sentences (1-9) are generic, while the choice of ‘enjoyable’ shows us sentences (1a-9a) and (10a-18a) are non-generic.

About what I am calling generic sentences, I am following Carlson (1989) who tells us that generic sentences typically express regularity but are not linguistically marked in English. However, we can determine them because “epistemologically, a generic sentence is one expressing a truth (or falsehood) the truth value of which cannot, in general, be ascertained solely with reference to any particular localized time” (167). As such, and paradigmatically speaking, the idea that the truth that ‘the sun sets in the west’ cannot be determined, even in principle, from one region of spacetime means such a sentence is *generic*, while ‘the sun *is* setting in the west’ is non-generic seeing its truth is determined at a discrete point in time and space. While for some purposes it is useful to distinguish between generic and habitual sentences, the above understanding has habitual sentences (e.g., ‘Polly smokes’) under the rubric of *generic* sentences seeing as one needs multiple observations, in principle, to determine the truth of the statement.

It follows then, that if the word ‘pleasurable’ is used in non-generic sentences about activities then the activities described as ‘pleasurable’ must be able to occur at a single region of spacetime. If the word ‘fun’ is used for generic sentences about activities, then it appears that the activities described as ‘fun’ must be able to occur at multiple regions of spacetime.

This all seems to be borne out by our lists: the activities on (1-9) (our ‘fun’ list) all appear able to be performed at multiple regions of spacetime, either by different people or the same person, whereas (10a-18a) appear able to be performed at one region of spacetime, but not two or more. For example, listening to the same piece of music, and playing the same board game can be done in multiple regions of spacetime, either by one person or many. Going to the same concert, although it cannot be done in multiple regions

of spacetime by a single person, can still be done in multiple regions by different people which I argue is why it also appears on the ‘fun’ list. On the other hand, even though the same *kind of* work can be done in two different regions of spacetime, the same work itself cannot be done in two regions of spacetime. Similarly, the same writing of a book, the same eating of a chocolate bar and so on, can’t be done twice, meaning that— according to the theory—these activities can be pleasurable or enjoyable, but never fun.

For the theory to hold the ‘kind of’ distinction is important. Almost everything can be done twice if we use the broad understanding to include ‘kinds’, however we are interested in the thing itself. For instance, the same *kind of* coffee can be drunk twice and the same *kind of* writing a book can be done twice (e.g., ‘about vampires’, ‘with other people’²) but the same coffee itself can’t be drunk twice and the same writing itself cannot be done twice. When we say that we can listen to the same music twice or play the same game twice we don’t mean they are able to listen to the same *kind of* music, or the same *kind of* game but to the same music or game itself.

Of course, all this would necessarily mean that every activity that is fun (i.e., able to occur at multiple regions of spacetime) also entails being pleasurable or enjoyable (i.e., able to occur in one region of spacetime), which sounds correct. Note that an activity being ‘fun’ needn’t necessarily mean that someone actually *is* enjoying themselves when they engage in the activity, only that the activity is enjoyable i.e., able to be performed in a single region of spacetime. As such we could be engaging in a fun, and thus enjoyable, activity, such as playing a video game, and not be actively enjoying ourselves, say if we are losing. The conditions of enjoyment *itself* is beyond the scope of this paper but perhaps might have something to do, in the case of a game, with a ‘one off’ region of spacetime, for example, where someone wins or is in a flow state.

Walter Podilchak (1991), was perhaps the first to notice, via surveys of the public, that there was general agreement that you can’t have a fun activity that is not enjoyable. This explains why, as well as a generic reading, (‘fun’) for (1-9) there is a non-generic (‘enjoyable’) reading for the same sentences (1a-9a). The difference is that the speaker presumably means to refer to a localized, non-generic, version of the activity with ‘enjoyable’ and ‘pleasurable’ and to a generic version of the activity with ‘fun’.

One important corollary of the present theory is that actions not being able to be fun should be read as a linguistic point not a psychological one. Several of the activities on the second list (10-18) could be called fun if given a different framing, such that, instead

² For this to work, ‘with another person’ must be considered a kind of writing just like ‘about vampires’ etc. It seems that although writing a book isn’t usually described as fun, writing a book with another person or about vampires could be. This is plausible if we are judging the theory by its own internal consistency whereby the same writing cannot be done twice but the same *kind of* activity can be done twice. This shows the linguistic nature of the theory: it is not the feeling from the writing (lest there be a contradiction) but that ‘fun’ signals something like a grammar relation.

of ‘have breakfast’, we could frame the same activity as ‘have breakfast with friends’ which is able to be performed at multiple regions of spacetime, at an event, say every Tuesday. This appears to transform the same act into potentially being fun through language choice, rather than necessarily describing a different activity. A naive reaction might be that it is the social nature of the activity, or the friendly feeling, turning the activity fun, which would be in line with fun being a flavor of psychological experience. Notice that social activity and friendly feelings are not always described by generic sentences, however.

Alan Dix (2004), for instance, suggests the following example of spending time with friends as being enjoyable but not fun:

An evening quietly sipping wine with friends, slowly watching the breeze fleck the still surface of cool waters, far off the gentle sound of a beck tumbling towards the lake, ducks and swans slowly gather on the water’s edge as the sun casts vivid lightshows across the distant hills (1)

Why wouldn’t this be fun? I argue simply because this evening is a ‘one off’, far too specific to be a generic sentence. But note that this is a linguistic difference in framing rather than a physical difference in occurrence—the above Dix passage could also be framed as ‘spending time with friends’. I argue that with this framing Dix’s activity could be called ‘fun’ due to being able to occur multiple times, and thus can signal ‘fun’ even if the participants are, in both examples doing identical activities and in identical phenomenological states. Thus, it seems that it is not being social that is the variable that makes things fun, but, rather, the language used to describe the activity.

The idea that it is sociability that makes things fun, comes from Podilchak (1991) who tells us: “You can enjoy yourself by yourself. You could enjoy yourself in a group. Sometimes you can have fun in a group. But you cannot have fun by yourself” (146). The reason for this conclusion was qualitative surveys given by Podilchak where he asked people about activities they enjoyed. Before the surveys were given, Podilchak presumed that ‘enjoyment’ and ‘fun’ were essentially synonymous. Then, in what he calls his ‘a-ha’ moment, he determined that it was with solitary activities that people reported enjoyment, while social activities were more likely reported as fun.

As we have seen, it seems that fun can be had on your own, perhaps by playing a video game, so I would disagree with Podilchak on this matter, however what I think Podilchak has noticed is that doing things with friends can very often turn activities fun. If I’m correct, though, Podilchak’s participants are responding to the fact that activities done with friends are often seen as fun due to the actions’ ability to be described with generic sentences. Once other people are involved, such as with our difference between the eating of a breakfast only able to occur once due to its being consumed, versus the eating of a breakfast with friends at an event that can occur every week, we can see that

language can just as easily explain this phenomenon as any appeal to a different subjective flavor of pleasure.

We know from Carlson that many adverbials, including time ones such as ‘every week’ or ‘every day’ have generic readings (Carlson 1989) seeing as they place knowledge of the actions, in principle, over more than one region of spacetime. Similarly to Podilchak’s observation of the social nature of fun, Ian Bogost in his *Play Anything* (2016) has perhaps hit on the generic connotations of time adverbials with his notion of fun being something to ‘work at’ or being able to be repeated. Bogost mentions the example of an activity such as mowing the lawn being ‘habitual’ and “the deliberate pursuit of which offers us access to their previously unseen depths” (Bogost 2016). His idea that “fun comes from the attention and care you bring to something, even stupid, seemingly boring activities” may be correct but in a surprising way. I suggest that it is not the paying attention that brings about some particular phenomenology but that the reproducible nature of these activities—the fact one can mow the lawn ‘every week’—that enables them to be described in generic sentences and thus be fun.

Conclusion

There have been a few attempts to draw together a theory of ‘fun’, notably Blythe and Hassenzahl’s distinction between absorption and fun, as well as Podilchak’s observation about the social nature of fun, Fincham’s ideas on the alleviation of responsibility and Bogost’s idea that fun must be worked at. I have not spent much time dismantling these theories seeing as, for one, they all contain a kernel of truth, and secondly, I think there is a distinct lack of falsifiable claims that they make. I would say, however, that I don’t find that the current literature engages with fun in a particularly elegant or satisfying way.

I suspect the reason study into fun has been stymied is because fun may, in fact, be a linguistic concept, and more like grammar, rather than a psychological or sociological phenomenon like the associated concept of flow is. This paper has provided a suggestion of what can be seen as a deflationary account, an idea to treat ‘fun’ in a linguistic way, analyzing whether associated sentences are so-called generic sentences. If I am correct then fun has a tight relationship to game playing, seeing as particular games can exist at different times and places (resulting in potentially generic sentences). While none of this is inarguable evidence that ‘fun’ is largely used to signal generic sentences in English, we might still draw the idea that fun, just maybe, is wrapped up in the way we use language rather than how we experience the world.

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