**Taskmasters and purposeless instructions: make-work as a compositional frame**

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**Abstract**

Work is, at times, arbitrary and somewhat pointless. In daily life the weight of purposeless tasks is a constant frustration, driven by a disconnect between the required work and its utility (Graeber 2018). We are given, and give, instructions to follow, often with no questioning of their value to ourselves or others, simply accepting them at face value. Equally in music we give instructions to others via scores which do not always question the rationale for the prescribed activities (Saunders 2017), instead assuming some kind of aesthetic outcome is in itself justification. In this paper I make connections between the perceived lack of value in many contemporary work contexts and the assumed validity of instruction-giving in music, considering the balance between purpose and task subservience in rule-based compositions. I reflect on recent projects, including my own, which require players to undertake a series of simple, repetitive activities that are in themselves relatively pointless, operating within a network of arbitrary rules and constraints, trying–or not–to complete the tasks as best they can. It questions whether the make-work we experience in daily life can be repurposed in music as a process for understanding how we construct value through decision-making, and the way these actions are observed by others.

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## 1. Bullshit jobs and musical purpose

Work is, at times, arbitrary and somewhat pointless. In daily life the weight of purposeless tasks can be a constant frustration, driven by a disconnect between the required work and its utility. In our professional and personal lives we are given, and give, instructions to follow, often with no questioning of their value to ourselves or others, simply accepting them at face value. This has become endemic in the contemporary workplace, spilling over into other contexts such as personal interactions, life administration and, consequently, art-making. In this paper I consider how staging purposeless musical tasks can help us reflect on meaning within systems of arbitrary constraint.

In the context of professional work, David Graebner defines these instances of purposeless work as symptomatic of *bullshit jobs*, which are

> a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case. (Graeber, 2018, pp.9-10)

He cites as examples “sectors like corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources, and public relations” as well as jobs that “provide administrative, technical, or security support for these industries, or, for that matter, the whole host of ancillary industries (dog washers, all-night pizza deliverymen) that only exist because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones.” (Graeber, 2018, xvi) The impact of these contexts spills over into our experiences as customers, with endless feedback surveys for seemingly every institutional interaction, the personal management of promotional correspondence if we forget to unsubscribe, and the fabricated need to engage online with commercial organisations driven by the fear of missing out. These are pointless tasks staged as necessary but of little perceivable value.

The bureaucratic procedures that are used to articulate these modes of behaviour have become a focus at the expense of the work itself. In relation to the management of work, Mark Fisher observes

> What we have is not a direct comparison of workers’ performance or output, but a comparison between the audited *representation* of that performance and output. Inevitably, a short-circuit occurs and work becomes geared towards the generation and massaging of representations rather than to the official goals of the work itself. (2022, p.42)

Distancing the purpose of work through the use of audit outputs as a proxy inherently removes purpose from a task. The bureaucracy is an end in itself, removing further the sense of purpose we might gain through work which has utility. Graebner goes on to define five types of bullshit jobs which perpetuate and instigate these actions:

> *flunkies*, whose jobs ‘exist only or primarily to make someone else look or feel important.’ (p.28)
>
> *goons*, whose jobs “have an aggressive element, but, crucially, […] exist only because other people employ them”, such as “lobbyists, PR specialists, telemarketers, and corporate lawyers.” (p.36)
>
> *duct tapers,* “whose jobs exist only because of a glitch or fault in the organization; who are there to solve a problem that ought not to exist.”
>
> *box tickers,* “who exist only or primarily to allow an organization to be able to claim it is doing something that, in fact, it is not doing.” (p.45)
>
> *taskmasters*, “whose role consists entirely of assigning work to others … [where] the taskmaster believes that there is no need for her intervention, and that if she were not there, underlings would be perfectly capable of carrying on by themselves” or “whose primary role is to create bullshit tasks for others to do, to supervise bullshit, or even to create entirely new bullshit jobs. One might also refer to them as bullshit generators.” (p.51)

It is this last category – taskmasters – in particular that is of interest to me in this paper given it is a perfectly serviceable definition of a composer. We are, on one level, bullshit generators.

In instruction-based music, the parallels between Graeber's framework and what composers ask of those realizing their scores is very clear. Musical scores function as systems of arbitrary task assignment that mirror workplace 'make-work,' revealing how we construct meaning through compliance with purposeless instructions. The power of the score to request of others actions which may not have apparent value has long been apparent, with the very fact we might contemplate performing Takehisa Kosugi's *Music for a Revolution* evidence that when framed in a particular way we might conform to requests that are otherwise deeply unattractive. Eldritch Priest suggests however that the space such instructions create is of aesthetic value, noting that

> what makes music experimental and truly pointless… [is] how it emphasizes the way multiple and incompatible views and demands can subsist indeterminately in its occasion as a vague fringe or aura of potential aesthetic effects. (Priest, 2013, pp.17-18)

Music sustains a space where multiple, even contradictory, interpretations coexist, leaving open many aesthetic possibilities. My question here is how compositions that play with the purposeless nature of task setting and its resultant pointlessness more explicitly can comment or help us reflect on these inducements to action. In part this is a question of the perceived authority and persuasiveness of instruction and the instruction giver.

## 2. Giving arbitrary instructions [1080 words]

My primary focus here is scores which use verbal instruction to determine what score-users do. This includes purely text-based scores, or hybrids where words are used to explain other kinds of notation and their encoded actions. How we give written instructions is principally mediated through grammatical choices, especially modals and mood, in relation to the forcefulness and apparent optionality of what is asked.

### Modality

Careful use of modals can moderate the intent of an instruction to affect how it is perceived in terms of its essential nature. Using words such as 'can', could', 'may' or 'might' suggest possibility or optionality, while modals such as 'must', 'need' 'shall' or 'should' are more forceful and obligatory. For example in this passage from Nomi Epstein's *portals* (2018) modals are used to present a less forceful and permission-giving approach to instruction:

> To determine durations of each white noise, a player **may** interpret each number to represent the number of seconds an air sound **should** be played for … Or, the player **may** interpret these as the number of times a particular sound **should** be articulated before moving on to the next white noise … Players **can** move between these two types of interpretations at will. Breaks of any length **can** be, but **don't need to be**, taken between sounds.

Compare that with this passage from G Douglas Barrett's *A Few Silence* (2008) where modals are used to give a firmer steer:

> A list of timings **should** be created, each timing to correspond to a textual description of a sound occurring at the given moment. Included in each description **should** be features such as the overall shape or contour of the sound, dynamic level, duration, etc. An occasional reference to a sound's source is ok but **should** not predominate.

The modal 'should' suggests some latitude in the application of the instructions, sitting somewhere between a requirement and advice. It seems to present best practice for the tasks, while giving some leeway for other approaches, but ultimately implying these things must happen. Should is an interesting word in this respect as it combines elements of the optional and obligatory depending on the context and mode of delivery: you should do this, you should probably do this, you should really do this, you should definitely do this, and so on.

<u>Mood</u>

In contrast, many instruction scores use the mood of a clause to indicate the essential nature of a task. Framing an instruction in the imperative mood can remove the need for the more direct modals 'must' or 'shall' by simply stating the thing to be done, issuing the instruction as a command. For example in the instructions for Cassandra Miller's *Rounding* (2017) she states

> **Play** 'recording A' through headphones, and sing along to this while making a new recording of your singing. ... While you are singing along, **carry out** a short body-scan meditation ... **Let** your body choose which notes and which lines it will sing along to, and **allow** yourself to **enjoy** the physical sensations of singing, in particular through your stomach and core area. **Resist** any urge to improve the resulting sound quality.

Here the imperative mood is used to make explicit the need to do these particular things for the piece to function. These are requirements for the players to commit to and are not presented as options, however forcefully articulated, though the use of modals. Approaches such as this represent by far the most common approach to instruction giving in verbal scores, which is not surprising given the function of the imperative mode in instruction manuals, recipes, textbooks, codes of practice, and many other similar documents.

Elsewhere the declarative mood is used to present other ways to coerce score users into action. The declarative mood can be used to make instructions less agential, removing the direct instruction to a performer. For example in Catherine Lamb's *divisio spiralis* (2020) the prefatory instructions state

> **tones**
>
> (in their fundamental state) are unforced/relaxed, with vibrant cores, yet balanced together to define their interactions and total shapes
>
> so that one does not overpower the other

melodic phrases are to highlight/unfold the harmonic space and the edges of the shapes, often embedded within the total sound

expressivity lies in the clear and plain unfolding of the harmonic colorations

Here the instructions just declare what happens, with the implication that it is the performer's role to establish how to do this. This is a good way to create a more objective set of instructions that are not aimed directly at the score user.

Purpose

Using these grammatical processes in scores presents a range of strategies for provoking people into action. Taken at face value, they shape activities and explain how to carry them out but tend not to explain why they need to be done. This seems to have a direct parallel with Graeber's examination of purpose in the workplace, where the reason for particular tasks may not be stated, or just assumed as implicit. In scores, the implicit justification is the production of the piece and the composer's sense that this is a valuable activity. It is not explicit and trades on the notion that doing the piece is a good thing. This is not unusual though: relatively few verbal scores state the purpose of realizing them. The scientism frame in Alvin Lucier's work is a notable exception, commonly suggesting purpose, such as in *The Duke of York* (1971) which states that 'Performances may be used to strengthen personal ties, make friends with strangers, or uncover clues to hidden families and past identities.' (Lucier, 1995)

But this is arbitrary. The autocratic role of the score, and its maker, set up a rather flimsy authority which relies on score users to accept the conditions of engagement. It begs the question as to why users might want to do this. In a workplace context the recompense provided by payment or other benefits fulfils this role in part, and of course for professional score users this might also be the case. There is therefore a direct correlation between bullshit jobs and the role of musicians in realizing scores (ask any composer or orchestral musician for their experience of working together!). But in a more voluntary capacity, it relies on the personal perception of artistic value and social obligation, in order to make the case for engagement. Without this, the task is purposeless.

## 3. Composer as taskmaster

In my recent work, I have been exploring apparently purposeless tasks as a way to reflect on my experience of the contemporary workplace. In these pieces, people work together to complete prescribed tasks. They either do that in parallel as a group of isolated individuals, or in various group arrangements that involve direct interaction and co-influence. Building on pieces which explore group decision-making, behaviours and dynamics, my focus has shifted in these pieces towards purposelessness. I have been interested for some time in the way goals and procedural rhetoric can be used to create purpose, often presenting game-like end states as something to aim for. In these more recent pieces, however, the activity itself is the goal but staged within the conceit that something more purposeful and intentional is driving the work undertaken by the players. It is not: they just do the job.

***performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed* (2023)**

In *performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed* (2023) the players are required to undertake a series of simple, repetitive activities involving the movement and manipulation of cardboard boxes that are in themselves relatively pointless. They are simultaneously given additional instructions which affect the way they carry out the tasks, accompanied by music from YouTube playlists matching the search terms 'concentration music', 'work focus music' and 'relaxation music'. This constitutes the work of the piece; the players operate within a network of arbitrary rules and constraints, trying–or not–to complete the tasks as best they can. There is no explicitly stated aim or goal for them to achieve, and the piece explores how following instructions can be an end in itself. Any sense of purpose emerges from their choices and the way they respond to the tasks, and in the way these actions are viewed.

The instructions themselves, presented on small cards, are clearly arbitrary. Examples include 'punch 88 holes in one surface of the box', 'rotate the box by a quarter turn 43 times', and 'cover any holes in the box with tape'. In parallel, instructions read by artificial voices instruct the players to complete other actions, such as 'Slowly push your box across the floor in a straight line until it reaches the edge of the marked area, then continue what you were doing' or 'If you are standing, sit down, and if you are sitting, stand up.' It is gratifying, and perhaps slightly concerning, that all participants in the first performance undertook these actions with focused dedication, seemingly absorbed in the tasks and completing them with care, and without question. Perhaps the use of the imperative mood in the instructions enforced the actions, but there are of course other contextual factors here. The title – a quote from Graeber - suggests the nature of the activity as being somewhat nonsensical. They were performing a piece in front of an audience with me as the composer-taskmaster present and participating. Some of the participants know me and have performed my work before. Some were students of other participants, so there is a hierarchical and transactional relationship between them. They are conditioned to perform pieces that involve following unusual instructions. Whatever the reason, nobody rebelled - at least visibly.

I am perhaps not best placed to consider meaning, but as a personal reflection I felt a sense of community and collective endeavour, a kind of respect for each other and understanding of the pointless nature what each of us were doing. There was a playfulness at times, and a focused seriousness of intent at others. There was bemusement and resignation, and frustration if a laborious task had to be repeated. Some kind of meaning emerged through sustained engagement with designed but essentially arbitrary rules for doing work.

***having to carry out the repetitive, mind-numbingly boring but still very necessary tasks required to manage increasingly complicated processes of production* (2025)**

The situation is different in my recent piece *having to carry out the repetitive, mind-numbingly boring but still very necessary tasks required to manage increasingly complicated processes of production* (2025). Here a large ensemble individually work through a looping set of sustained sounds, following commands given by their choice of player in a small ensemble which tell them

when to move to the next sound. This cycle is sporadically interrupted by longer organ drones which reset the process.

Although the small ensemble players are given some control, they do not know the effect of their cues on the actions of the large ensemble players. Equally, the large ensemble players must keep cycling through their sounds, following increasingly complicated routes through the material, while having little agency in any choices they make. The actions of all players are dependent on the choices of others but have very little effect on the resulting work and sound. There is an illusion of purpose and organisation, but essentially this is arbitrary. There are coercive rules to follow that shape the behaviours and culture of the players, but no indication of any goals or results to achieve.

The piece attempts to play with aspects of institutional behaviour, where an organsiational structure tasks its workers with clearly defined jobs which are obligatory but may have little obvious purpose. It is musical make-work, extended over a 30-minute duration, resulting in a shifting textural surface punctuated by short spoken instructions. It is, as the title suggests, repetitive and mind-numbingly boring.

In both these pieces my role as composer-taskmaster sets up arbitrary instructions for participants to follow. In a direct parallel with situations in the workplace, a range of strategies and responses seem to emerge. Participants find ways to be creative within the constraints of the tasks, using the system to direct their own actions and influence others in creating preferred outcomes: essentially asking ‘what happens if I do this?’. Elsewhere resignation and minimal engagement are apparent, with participants doing only what is required of them by working to rule, or just obtusely following instructions as literally as possible. My own experience of the workplace resonates at different times with both these strategies.

**4. Doing what we are told?**

My hope, then, is that both participants and observers use these pieces as ways to reflect on their own exposure to similar situations and how we might negotiate between compliance and interpretation when following instructions. But there is an ethical question raised by requiring participants to follow arbitrary instructions set by the composer-taskmaster. How can we justify putting people in positions of subjugation to our demands, whether this is through performative instructions or simply reading pitches on a stave? We might tacitly assume their participation is consenting through the convention of the composer-performer contract, whether paid or not, but perhaps we need to create space for dissent. One of the surprising things that emerges in these pieces is the lack of active resistance or refusal. Although in these pieces playful interpretation is a common creative response to constraint, outright critique through non-compliance is not. Perhaps mirroring the ramifications of this in the workplace, breaking the social, or legal, contract may be a step too far. But in the workplace we unionise, strike, hold tribunals, complain, resign and are dismissed. The workplace ecosystem is endlessly complex and exploring the full range of parallels through staging these processes in music has many untapped possibilities to consider as a way to reflect on the kinds of working environments we might value.

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