

All work and no play makes Bill a dull boy: A comment

Glen R. Waddell *

Department of Economics, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, 97403-1285

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Abstract

In this paper we document just some of the fallout attributable to the circulation patterns of Harbaugh (2003).

Keywords: work, play, dull, boy.

* Phone: (541) 346-1259; Fax: (541) 346-1243; Email: waddell at uoregon dot edu

** The author acknowledges Bill Harbaugh for stating his point so well. Without such support, the two hours of play that went into this line of reasoning would have been neglected in favour of work.

In Harbaugh (2003), a very specific point is argued. Without loss of generality, the position taken is that all work and no play makes Bill a dull boy. The purpose of this paper is twofold – to comment on the generalizability of the claim made and offer evidence suggestive of having had influence far beyond the original intended purpose.

I. “Theory”

In terms of generalizing the Harbaugh (2003) argument, one should first note that the author’s given name is William. However, as is common practice, William T. Harbaugh answers to the name “Bill.” This familiar naming convention is further evidenced by the use of “Bill Harbaugh” atop the author’s personal webpage. In fact, William is one of many variants to which the individual in question responds, others also being listed under the “also known as” abbreviation.¹ It is reasonable, then, to consider the “Bill” of the thesis statement that “all work and no play makes Bill a dull boy” as none other than the author himself, William T. Harbaugh. In terms of generalizing the result, it remains an open question whether the corner solution being described implies that all such-named individuals would be found dull when partaking only of work and no play.²

¹ See <http://harbaugh.uoregon.edu/>.

² Possible definitions for dull include the following:

- lacking in liveliness or animation; "he was so dull at parties"; "a dull political campaign"; "a large dull impassive man"; "dull days with nothing to do"; "how dull and dreary the world is"; "fell back into one of her dull moods."
- emitting or reflecting very little light; "a dull glow"; "dull silver badly in need of a polish"; "a dull sky"
- being or made softer or less loud or clear; "the dull boom of distant breaking waves"; "muffled drums"; "the muffled noises of the street"; "muted trumpets"
- boring: so lacking in interest as to cause mental weariness; "a boring evening with uninteresting people"; "the deadening effect of some routine tasks"; "a dull play"; "his competent but dull performance"; "a ho-hum speaker who couldn't capture their attention"; "what an irksome task the writing of long letters is"- Edmund Burke; "tedious days on the train"; "the tiresome chirping of a cricket"- Mark Twain; "other people's dreams are dreadfully wearisome"
- (of color) very low in saturation; highly diluted; "dull greens and blues"
- make dull in appearance; "Age had dulled the surface"
- not keenly felt; "a dull throbbing"; "dull pain"
- become dull or lusterless in appearance; lose shine or brightness; "the varnished table top dulled with time"
- dense: slow to learn or understand; lacking intellectual acuity; "so dense he never understands anything I say to him"; "never met anyone quite so dim"; "although dull at classical learning, at mathematics he was uncommonly quick"- Thackeray; "dumb officials make some really dumb decisions"; "he was either normally stupid or being deliberately obtuse"; "worked with the slow students"
- muffle: deaden (a sound or noise), especially by wrapping

In keeping with the tradition in this line of literature – not establishing so much as positing results – I hold that the following be true.

Lemma 1: All work and no play makes boys named Bill dull.

From Lemma 1, it is only a hop, skip and jump to the following proposition.

Proposition 2: All work and no play makes individuals named Bill dull, whether boy or girl.

(Oh yes... I almost forgot the QED.) QED. Of course, while tempted to push the envelope of inquiry even further, we leave positing beyond the set of people named Bill for future research.

II. Empirics

In contemplating the reach of the seminal piece in this line of literature, we provide evidence suggestive of the much more far-reaching implications than we first thought. Consider for yourself the implication of finding out that all work and no play causally relates to people named Bill being found dull. You are bound to ask, “If this is true of people named Bill, might it be true for me?”

No, really, consider it, Bill. At whatever margin you find yourself at now, what might your response to this be? With dull being something to be avoided, what would you do? Assuming that the marginal adjustment implied by a large population of people named Bill having had such a realization would be toward working less, below we consider the time series of national non-farm employment levels for the period spanned by the circulation of the paper (i.e., 2003-3 through 2007-5). In particular, we estimate the following model of employment.

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- (of business) not active or brisk; "business is dull (or slow)"; "a sluggish market"
 - numb: make numb or insensitive; "The shock numbed her senses"
 - not having a sharp edge or point; "the knife was too dull to be of any use"
 - make dull or blunt; "Too much cutting dulls the knife's edge"
 - blunted in responsiveness or sensibility; "a dull gaze"; "so exhausted she was dull to what went on about her"- Willa Cather
 - pall: become less interesting or attractive
 - not clear and resonant; sounding as if striking with or against something relatively soft; "the dull thud"; "thudding bullets"
 - make less lively or vigorous; "Middle age dulled her appetite for travel"

$$[1] \quad NFE_t = \alpha + \beta D_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t,$$

where NFE is total non-farm employment, D is a count variable reflecting the number of times Harbaugh (2003) has been downloaded online, and ε is the traditional i.i.d. error.³ The number of downloads is lagged one period, allowing for a one-month lag in potential response time to reading Harbaugh (2003).

In short, regression results predicting non-farm employment levels suggest a negative relationship between download activity on this particular paper and national employment levels. The results are reported in Table 1, where the point estimate suggest that for the period spanned by the circulation of Harbaugh (2003) national employment levels have fallen by roughly 88,824 with each download/read of the work. The estimate is only marginally significant, however, at 11 percent.

With a quick reassessment of the particular work in question, one may reasonably argue that given the nature of the full discussion provided in the paper, one might expect that download counts may well miss the true import of the paper. For example, on the basis that once the abstract has been read a fuller consultation of the paper is not likely to reveal any additional information to the reader, any behavioural response resulting from knowledge may be more directly related to a measure of abstract contact. Thus, Column (2) considers the following model,

$$[2] \quad NFE_t = \alpha + \beta D_{t-1} + \gamma A_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t,$$

where A_{t-1} is a lagged count variable reflecting the number of times the abstract of Harbaugh (2003) has been viewed.

- darkened with overcast; "a dark day"; "a dull sky"; "a grey rainy afternoon"; "grey clouds"; "the sky was leaden and thick"

³ see <http://econpapers.repec.org/paper/oreuoecwp/2003-3.htm>

It is with this refined model of employment that the full story begins to unfold, for the results presented in Column (2) of Table 1 suggest that download activity is indeed insignificant after controlling for the count of abstract viewings. In fact, point estimates suggest that with each abstract viewed, national non-farm employment falls by 104,504 individuals.

III. Concluding remarks

The main contribution of Harbaugh (2003) is to disseminate that all work and no play might make Bill a dull boy. To this end, contemplating the reach of Harbaugh (2003) suggests that the circulation of the paper does relate to subsequent national employment levels, not inconsistent with an expected labour supply response to the information.

Future work might consider the endogenous arrival of Harbaugh (2003), or a fuller exploration of the time-series patterns in employment levels. The potential pattern of dissemination as it relates to regional employment levels is also left for future research, as is the analysis of play.

Table 1: Total Non-farm Employment (thousands).

Total non-farm employment available from BLS. The time-series of Harbaugh (2003) statistics is available from <http://logec.repec.org/scripts/paperstat.pl?h=repec:ore:uoecwp:2003-3>.

	(1)	(2)
Lagged Downloads	-88.8249 [54.609]	-76.917 [53.609]
Lagged Abstract Viewings		-104.504** [55.401]
Constant	133461.9*** [445.156]	134846.6*** [852.761]
Observations	51	51
R ²	0.05	0.12

* 10 percent, ** 5 percent; *** 1 percent.

References

Harbaugh, W.T. (2003) "All Work and No Play Makes Bill a Dull Boy," working paper, University of Oregon.