



A Place to Play: Innovating the Practice of Strategy Research

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Abstract

This paper responds to the repeated call for innovation in the practice of strategy research. We begin by suggesting that the capacity of strategy researchers to create innovative knowledge depends on the requisite variety of the concepts and methods available to the field. We go on to identify the recent elaboration of an 'organic' perspective (Farjoun, 2002) as a positive step toward increased variety, and we extend the epistemological power of this critique. In the interest of developing research practices that are adaptively responsive to change, we introduce 'play' both a) as a concept that has been shown to increase human adaptive variability, and b) as a research method that has been deployed extensively in disciplines adjacent to management studies. We go on to present an overview of our own, play-based strategy research program, as well as two case stories that demonstrate the power of play to yield innovative concepts and methods for strategy research.

Key words: Strategy, research, innovation, play

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Innovating strategy research: a practical problematic

Over the last decade, the strategy research community has repeatedly emphasized the need for innovation, engaging in a series of attempts to develop and promote new forms of research. For example, Strategic Management Journal special issue editors Chakravarthy and Doz focused on the notion of 'self-renewal' (1992), Pettigrew identified 'fundamental themes' (1992), and Prahalad and Hamel searched for 'new paradigms' (1994). Efforts such as these have certainly inspired scholars to consider and participate in innovative forms of research—indeed, the Strategic Management Society has grown to include a 'Strategy Process Interest Group,' and several recent conferences have focused on new concepts and methods for strategy process research. And yet, as the complexity (Hitt, 2000) and discontinuity (Hamel, 2000) of the business environment continue to intensify, leaving change itself as the only apparent constant (McGrath and MacMillan, 2000:1) in the organizational landscape, the need for innovative strategies becomes more and more acute. How should we respond to this need as researchers?

A basic tenet of systems theory is the law of requisite variety (LRV) (Ashby 1960), which indicates that a system's capacity to sustain itself in the face of change depends on its internal variety or diversity. When applied to the managerial practice of making strategy, the implications of the LRV are clear: in order to respond effectively to complex, discontinuous change in the contemporary business environment, managers should try to maximize the diversity of the business strategy in question. By extension, the implications of the LRV for the strategy research community would seem equally straightforward: in order to respond effectively to the need for diverse business strategies, strategy researchers should strive to increase the diversity of their own concepts and methods. This essay is therefore an attempt to increase the variety of concepts and methods available to strategy researchers, and thus, to produce the conditions necessary for strategy research that responds innovatively to the needs of practitioners. Toward that end, we begin by extending a recent analysis of the epistemological barriers to innovative strategy research (Farjoun, 2002) by referring to the 'dominant logics' that function at various

levels of scale in the community. In an explicit attempt to overcome such barriers, we continue by advancing play both as a theoretical concept and as a practical method for strategy research. In this regard, we present 1) a definition of the concept of play in the context of strategy research, 2) an overview of the play-based research methods we have deployed thus far, and 3) an account of several preliminary research findings. Our overall intent is to intensify the ongoing debates regarding the practice of strategy research, and thus to contribute to the field a portion of the variety required to produce knowledge that is capable of guiding strategic practice in today's complex and changing world.

Dominant logics: Are we asking the right questions?

The problematic of innovating the practice of strategy research gives rise immediately to a reflexive line of questioning: what are the barriers to innovation in the field of strategy research? This issue appears to pertain to the basic, epistemological assumptions that define the relationship between strategy researchers and their objects of study. It may pertain as well as to the methodological practices accepted by the research community as legitimate modes of producing new, or innovative, knowledge. A recent analysis cautions that, with regard to its core epistemology, the field of strategy research has remained "better suited to a relatively stable and predictable world," becoming increasingly "at odds with the more complex and constantly changing observed behavior of individuals, firms and markets" (Farjoun, 2002). Farjoun is certainly not alone in claiming that strategy research has traditionally been oriented by a 'mechanistic' epistemology derived from the Newtonian natural sciences. But in seeking to move beyond this heritage, he calls for the development of an 'organic' perspective on strategy that would innovate at the level of epistemological constructs in three primary ways (2002:567). First, the organic perspective would take a view of time that is incessant and diachronic rather than discrete and synchronic. Second, the organic perspective would take a nonlinear and interactive view of strategy processes rather than the linear and directional view taken by the mechanistic perspective. Finally, the organic perspective would emphasize integrated rather than

differentiated constructs through which to view its object of knowledge. Taken seriously, such methodological innovations hold the promise to transform both the conduct as well as the content of strategy research, and we are hopeful that this 'organic' perspective which they help to constitute may allow the field to advance. At the same time, we believe that Farjoun's analysis can be extended in two significant ways.

First, we suggest that the 'mechanistic' perspective analyzed by Farjoun can be productively considered as a 'dominant logic' (Prahalad and Bettis, 1986; Bettis and Prahalad, 1995). While this concept has been developed to account for the problems confronting managers involved in diversification attempts without reducing the complexity of the situation to purely economic factors, we believe it can be applied to the field of strategy research as well. The term 'dominant logic' indicates a pervasive, yet invisible predisposition toward certain kinds of problems that functions at the level of organizational systems in such a way as to produce and perpetuate those very problems. This inertial function has been shown to be self-referential, occurring across different levels of scale (Von Krogh and Roos 1996). In this sense, knowledge would appear to be co-created by individuals in an organizational system with reference to their previous knowledge about the system itself. This incremental process of knowledge creation does not appear to correspond to traditional hierarchies of decision-making responsibility. Rather, to put the point in context, all levels of the organizational system of 'strategy research' contribute to the perpetuation of the mechanistic logic on a variable basis whether the participating individuals intend to do so or not. Thus the mechanistic perspective on strategy appears not merely to be 'at odds with' or epistemologically inadequate to the complex world of organizations. But additionally, it appears to predispose researchers at different levels of the community toward concepts and methods that function surreptitiously in such a way as to reproduce traditional forms of knowledge that block innovative responses to change. Thus, if we view the mechanistic perspective as a dominant logic, Farjoun's critique of the strategy research field becomes more subtle, and the formal distinction between 'mechanistic' and 'organic' perspectives becomes a

direct call for all researchers to consider reflexively whether their own methods might inhibit the emergence of innovative knowledge rather than enable it.

Second, this reflexive line of inquiry allows us to extend Farjoun's analysis on another significant point. The mechanistic dominant logic inherited from the Newtonian natural sciences seeks to isolate efficient causes and predict necessary effects. As indicated already, this relationship to objects of knowledge appears to be more appropriate to a relatively stable and predictable world, and less appropriate to a complex world of dynamic change. Yet at the same time, this epistemological heritage also carries a notion of instrumental rationality which presumes that knowledge about efficient causal relationships confers a power to individuals, allowing them to control for specific variables and thereby to attain desired strategic outcomes. Thus, the ultimate measure of the truth, or relevance, of strategy research findings frequently appears to be extent to which the knowledge produced will allow organizations to attain the goal that is desired, namely, competitive advantage through organizational renewal and growth (Schendel and Hofer, 1979). We may wonder hopefully: can our research reveal an efficient and necessary causal relationship between a certain dependent variable and strategic innovation itself? And yet, with regard to our contemporary world, can this be the right question? We suggest that, in view of a complex environment characterized by dynamic change, it is inappropriate to assume that knowledge can be used intentionally or instrumentally to control the future and necessarily achieve specific aims or ends. The 'organic' perspective on strategy therefore cannot be judged on the basis of whether it produces more actionable strategic directives for organizations—such a judgment could only be made in a static, stable world. Rather, the organic perspective on strategy research must instead be judged on the basis of whether it is methodologically adequate to (i.e., sufficiently variable or diverse) to accommodate the complexity of contemporary organizations. On this point, the practical need for innovation confronts strategy researchers directly. How can we conduct research in such a way as to account for emergent, complex change both at the level of our object of study as well as at the level of our own methods and epistemological constructs? Phrased another way, how can we fully ensure that the practice of

strategy research is sufficiently diverse to continue developing knowledge about the complex system of organizations? The following sections of this essay consist of an effort to increase the requisite variety of concepts and methods available to strategy researchers, in the hopes that the knowledge developed by our field will remain as meaningful as possible for organizations.

Play: A concept and method for strategy research?

In view of the mechanistic perspective that functions as a dominant logic in our field, we recognize the challenge of innovating the practice of strategy research. Furthermore, we recognize that the variety present in our concepts and methods must be sufficient to accommodate the variety present in our object of study. Precisely in this regard, we advance play as a concept and a method that holds the promise to increase the requisite variety in our field and enable researchers to develop innovative knowledge about strategy processes. Granted, it may at first seem counter-intuitive, even counter-productive to consider play in the context of organizational strategy. But on closer examination, play has been shown to have developmental significance, producing cognitive, social, and emotional benefits for children and adults as well. With respect to our present considerations, it has been argued most compellingly that play is the quintessential human activity through which 'adaptive variability' is cultivated (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 229). In other words, if we as researchers seek to increase the variety of our concepts and methods, there may be nothing more natural or practical for us to do than to play. But how exactly does the concept of play fit in the context of strategy research? Moreover, how exactly would a strategy researcher go about using a play-based method to generate new knowledge? Such questions arise in part because the term 'play' is used in everyday speech both metaphorically to connote a particular mode of activity (e.g., he has a playful attitude in the boardroom) as well as nominally to denote particular forms of activity (e.g., playing sports, music, etc.). Thus, we are obliged to explain more precisely how the adaptive potential of play can be brought to bear on the practice of strategy research.

The concept: play vs. work

At the level of the concept, play has been addressed extensively in scholarly literatures distinct from, yet adjacent to the study of organizations. It is most important for our present considerations to take note of how these literature streams (within the broad fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology and philosophy) conceptualize the relationship between 'play' and 'work.' Most generally, play and work activities appear to be distinguished fundamentally by the character of the intent with which individuals engage in them. People work with the intent to produce something specific that is of value beyond the frame of the activity in question (e.g., strategists work to produce organizational renewal and growth). On the other hand, people play without productive intent, or simply, for the sake of the activity itself (e.g., the athlete plays for the love of the game). Work is more precisely productive or goal-oriented, and play is by contrast unproductive, serving as an end in itself with respect to the intentions of those who engage in it. Somewhat paradoxically, it appears that the 'unproductive' character of one's intentions may be precisely what allows play activities to yield certain emotional, social and cognitive outcomes (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). And interestingly, these outcomes appear to hold great significance in the context of organizational strategy. Indeed, the psychological literature indicates that play allows people to develop the cognitive (Piaget, 1958) and emotional (Erikson, 1964) capacities necessary for effective, productive work. In turn, the sociological literature casts play as an activity through which people frame and adapt the social contexts (Huizenga, 1950; Goffman, 1959; Bateson, 1972) and relationships necessary for work. The anthropological literature demonstrates that play allows people to develop and adapt cultural identities (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1982), and that the purpose and value of work may be determined within this frame. Finally, the philosophical literature suggests that our playful imagination is a condition for the possibility of ethical judgment (Kant, 1950; Schiller 1983), which can in turn effectively guide work activity. In light of these assertions, the dominant logic which relegates play to the periphery of organizations cannot legitimately be sustained. And to the extent that emotional, social, cultural and cognitive adaptivity pertain to strategy-making in a complex world, play would seem to be a

crucially important concept for strategy research. To be sure, additional research is necessary in order to develop a coherent theory of organizational life that can account holistically both for work and for play. Additional research is similarly necessary in order to correlate specific play activities with specific strategic outcomes. But pending the full elaboration of such an 'organic' perspective, the apparent significance of the concept of play has lead us to begin conducting play-based strategy research. For strategy research practices, the concept of play refers to a form of activity that is undertaken without the intention to yield direct, productive results, but nevertheless holds adaptive human potential on emotional, social and cognitive levels – and thereby, play increases the variety of concepts available to the system of knowledge about strategy processes. But how then could such a theoretical concept support a method of study?

The method: paradigms and case stories

Clinical and therapeutic applications of play are commonly used by psychological researchers within the paradigm of object relations theory (esp. following Klein 1932; Winnicott 1971; Erikson, 1964). Such research seeks first to understand processes of cathexis, whereby objects come to have emotional significance for individuals and second, to facilitate therapeutic processes of catharsis, whereby individuals interact playfully with objects in such a way as to develop a healthy, emotionally mature sense of identity. While the majority of such applications have been focused on children, educational theorists have argued that the 'adaptive variability' of play pertains to humans of all ages (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Furthermore, play-based research methods have been deployed within the sociological paradigm of frame analysis (Goffman 1974) as well as within the constructivist paradigm of research into cognition and learning (Piaget 1958). Taken together, these paradigms and established research practices help to provide a theoretical justification and empirical precedent for the use of play-based research methods (previously explored by Roos and Victor, 1999) to develop new knowledge about the complex cognitive, social and emotional dynamics that pertain to adults engaged in strategy-making processes. In the more immediate context of organizational studies then, the paradigm of action research

(Argyris et al, 1985) provides an overarching, holistic methodology that encourages direct, open-ended involvement of the researcher in the organization's activities. More specifically, it is the transformative (Toomey, 1997) character of action research that pertains most directly to play-based strategy research methods. And with regard to the individuals who participate in play-based research, the paradigm of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) (e.g., ropes courses, mountain climbing, etc.) provides a strong precedent for non-traditional training and development activities, thereby allowing play activities to be recognized and justified by the organizational leadership. In view of these diverse paradigms, the most significant challenge for the researcher as well as for the organization is to ensure that the content of the play-based research activity is the actual strategy content itself: the firm, its resources, its environment, its goals, its challenges, etc. Furthermore, the process of the play-based research activity should also complement the organization's strategy-making process itself.

Over the last 3 years, we have developed, refined and deployed a play-based research program focused on strategy-making. Our research team has included twelve researchers based in four countries, who together have outputted over 20 academic papers, and presented at 10 international conferences in the management and organizational studies realm. In total, we have played with over 400 managers in 20 large multinational organizations. Participants have primarily included strategy-making teams, though our inquiry has engaged other natural constituencies such as brand teams, culture teams, and business unit or functional leadership teams. We have gathered extensive qualitative data, including pre-interviews with participants, participant observation of the strategy-making practices of undertaken by the management teams, over 75 hours of videotape of strategy-making teams engaged in play activities, post-interviews with the participants, and ongoing contact with dozens of managers who have adopted play-based strategy processes for their own organizations. Finally, we have analyzed the data that continue to emerge from this play-based action research program using interpretative and collaborative methodologies. The actual process of the play activities themselves has involved the staged and facilitated use of LEGO materials (including a range of differently colored and

shaped, studded bricks as well as other metaphorical elements) as a 3-D medium for communication among managers. This medium has been selected based on two criteria: 1) with low barriers to entry, it provides individuals with a powerful, new tool for sensemaking, and 2) the different elements of the medium (formally considered, the grammatical units of LEGO materials) may be combined in a practically infinite variety of ways. Beyond these practical, methodological benefits, as world's largest construction system it is widely known, and its brand values place great importance on playful learning.

With respect to the variety of concepts available to strategy process research, we believe that two specific data sets appear to capture the adaptive, innovative potential of play particularly well. We present these data sets here in the form of short narrative cases, a story-telling practice that has been presented as most appropriate to adaptive intelligence (Detienne and Vernant, 1974)

Case Story 1.0 - Telecom Inc.

Together with a major telecommunications firm with 30 million customers and operations in twenty countries, we staged a series of six play-based strategy workshops over a two-year period for the corporate strategy team, the global strategic planners and selected executives from the corporate culture and brand teams. The firm's leadership came to regard its practice of innovative strategy-making processes as a source of potential competitive differentiation, and as researchers, we found that when strategy-makers play with the content of their own strategy, they focus relatively less on their visions of the future and more on their identity in the present. In the course of the play activities, the identity of the Telecom Inc. organization was constructed in such a way as to represent a flotilla of differently shaped and sized ships scattered across the sea, with the historical success of the brand behind them as a point of reference and a customer-focused vision of technology drawing them on into the unknown. However, no matter how expertly or precisely participants tried to represent the organization's planned strategy, they began to see that through the passage of time in a complex world, emergence happens. In other words, unexpected events frequently render aspects of the planned strategy obsolete. In response to

such events, the Telecom Inc. strategy-makers recognized that they must rely not on the plan, but rather on their capacity for adaptive responsiveness. This reliance appeared to require a cognitive awareness of the emergent change, but additionally it required emotional acceptance of the emergent change and social interaction and communication in response to change. And while the strategy-makers had been informally aware of the emotional and social aspects of their strategy, they had not thematized them explicitly prior to their involvement in the play-based activity. In turn, while these various levels of experience and behavior in strategy processes have been addressed separately by the field, they have never been thematized holistically as an integrated part of the reality of strategy processes. Thus, the story of Telecom Inc. may indicate that the explanatory and methodological power of play can provide direct support to that organic, holistic perspective on strategy which, as indicated above, should involve research practices that 1) view time as incessant and diachronic, 2) take a nonlinear and interactive view of strategy processes, and 3) emphasize integrated constructs through which to view the object of knowledge (Farjoun, 2002).

Case Story 1.1 – Specialty Chemicals Ltd.

An old chemicals manufacturing firm had been consistently successful in an industry sector that had remained traditional and static for decades. In recent years the firm had begun to experience dynamic change in the sector, and it had begun to question the effectiveness of its traditional, three-year planning cycle. In particular, when the dedicated planning team and the leadership of the three main divisions of the firm released their co-authored draft of the upcoming plan, corporate management became concerned that the upcoming plan looked too much like the previous plan, and that the strategy development process itself appeared to have been unable to respond to the emergent changes already underway in the business landscape. With the corporate management team as sponsors, we staged play-based workshops for each of the three divisional strategy teams as an extension to the traditional planning process. In two of these divisions, half of the participants were the existing planning team members and half were functional leaders from the division, while in the third division, the entire divisional leadership

team participated. In the course of the facilitated process, these groups repeatedly expressed surprise at the strategic insights they gained by allowing their hands to play around and communicate using the LEGO medium. Specialty Chemicals Ltd.'s organizational identity was physically represented on different occasions as a complex management process, as a variety of value delivery mechanisms being hampered by an inefficient support structure, and as a tightly interwoven network in which any small change can affect the entire system. Perhaps more significantly, through the play-based activities, the divisional leaders and planners gained three insights that neither they, nor corporate management had fully intended or expected: 1) that the plan which they had prepared had failed sufficiently to address the potential impact of disruptions already being felt in the marketplace, 2) that the proposed strategic focus on key account clients would require the development and implementation of more responsive value delivery mechanisms, and 3) that the overall state of one division had had been drastically over-estimated, signaling the need for more sensitive analytic measures in future planning processes. This story seems to indicate therefore that while strategy-makers (like strategy researchers) can also become stuck in dominant logics that predispose them to perpetuate the very problems they seek to solve, the constructive and communicative use of the hand in strategy-making processes can bring about new ways of representing and understanding the organization and its landscape. Discussions of the importance of the hand-mind connection for cognition have arisen in other scientific contexts (Wilson 1998; Piaget 1958; Harel & Papert 1991), and the metaphor of the bricoleur has even been advanced to explain the practice of making strategy as a kind of manual tinkering (see Weick, 1979; Levi-Strauss, 1966; Mintzberg 1987). However, due perhaps to the sheer, idiosyncratic variety of such phenomena, it has previously been quite difficult however to gather consistent, rich data on them, even though anecdotal experience suggests that successful strategists tweak their plans and models almost constantly in response to emergent changes. The story of Specialty Chemicals Ltd. appears to suggest therefore that play-based research methods may be particularly well-suited to accommodate the incessant, nonlinear, integrated process of strategic-making as bricolage.

We have selected and presented these two case stories to illustrate the variety that play can bring to the concepts and methods of strategy research. Both stories indicate that organizations reflect on their own identity not simply in reaction to crisis situations (as argued by Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Glynn, 2000), but also under more 'normal' circumstances. Thus, identity appears to be an important aspect of strategy processes that has not yet been adequately understood by researchers. In turn, play appears to provide a conceptual lens through which researchers may begin to see the complex emotional, social and cognitive processes associated with the strategic development and adaptation of organizational identity. Furthermore, play appears to provide a more concrete conceptual foundation for the abstract notion of emergence. Over the last few years, complex adaptive systems theory has allowed strategists to identify certain dependencies within the organization and its landscape as 'emergent'. It has moreover been argued that strategy researchers should consider the overall process of strategy formulation and implementation itself as an 'emergent' phenomenon (Stacey, 1995). While these innovations represent a strong move away from the traditional, dominant logic, it remains difficult to build any descriptive theory beyond the simplistic assertion 'emergence happens,' and thus the field remains attached to the explanatory power of the mechanistic perspective. However, play research in the psychological, sociological, anthropological and philosophical disciplines has long focused on how individuals and groups perceive and respond to the emergence of unexpected change. And although we have only begun to explore the possible relevance of play to the cognitive, social and emotional dimensions of organizational life, it appears that the existing streams of play research may provide a concrete conceptual foundation upon which researchers can build more effective theory to describe emergence in the context of strategy processes.

On a methodological level, the two case stories indicate first and foremost that strategy researchers can benefit significantly by using research methods that draw on the hand-mind connection. Indeed, the dominant logic of the mechanistic perspective may well be able to sustain itself to the extent it remains purely cognitive, existing in a 'minds-only' paradigm. To the contrary, our research indicates that when strategy-makers are encouraged playfully to use their

hands and minds to represent and communicate strategy content using three-dimensional materials of different colors, shapes and sizes, they immediately become aware of the limitations inherent in their existing analytic assumptions. For example, the most basic assumption that strategy should be planned completely in advance and then subsequently implemented seems fundamentally inadequate to a complex business environment. More adequate is the assumption that strategy consists of bricolage activities through which managers tinker more or less constantly with their plans in response to emergent change. In this light, play-based methodologies seem to shrink, if not collapse, the distance between thought and action, allowing strategy-makers as well as strategy researchers to reflect directly on the simultaneity of planning and doing. Of course, strategy-makers must still deal with the challenge of implementation once the play process has finished, just as strategy researchers must still translate their findings into knowledge that holds value for the field. Nevertheless, the play-based methodology appears to fulfill the transformative potential of action research, enhancing and encouraging the development of new discourses and collaborative practices in response to existing, but inadequate organizational practices (Toomey, 1997:118). And thus, although play may be properly defined in juxtaposition to work as an activity that is undertaken without direct, productive intent, it nevertheless appears as a concept and a method that can promote the 'adaptive variability' that is so crucial for strategy-making in a complex world.

Conclusion: Playful possibilities for innovative strategy research

We set out to try to respond to the call for innovative strategy research. We suggested, in accordance with systems theory, that the capacity of strategy researchers to respond innovatively to this call depends significantly on the requisite variety of our concepts and methods. In this regard, we identified the recent exploration of an 'organic' perspective on strategy as an important step toward increased variety. We sought to extend this step by characterizing the 'mechanistic' perspective as a dominant logic, and by raising questions concerning the instrumental rationality that remains a crucial part of the epistemological heritage of the field of strategy research. In the interest then of identifying research concepts and methods that do not purport to control for

variables in an unforeseeable future, but instead encourage adaptive responsiveness to complex change both at the level of the object of knowledge as well as at the level of the research practices deemed legitimate by the field, we introduced play. We found that play has been well established as a research method used to focus on the incessant, nonlinear and integrated emotional, social and cognitive dimensions of individuals and groups. Furthermore, we found that the psychological, sociological, anthropological and philosophical literatures indicate that play can serve to develop adaptive variability. In turn, our empirical, organizational research program indicates that strategy-makers may find play a natural, practical way to develop this potential.

With regard to the practice of strategy research then, we argued here that play-based activities, undertaken within the paradigm of action research, can yield new, valuable knowledge about the concepts of identity and emergence, as well as about the methodological significance of the hand-mind connection for strategic processes of bricolage. In conclusion, we have argued that the concepts and methods that pertain to play appear to increase the variety that is required by strategy researchers to innovate new research practices in response to the complex, multilevel variables associated with strategy processes. We continue to heed the calls for strategy research that yields innovative knowledge about 'processes of organizational renewal and growth' (Schendel and Hofer, 1979) – and in this essay we have proposed that the best way to innovate the practice of strategy research itself may be to play.

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