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Ain't Misbehavin':
Taking Play Seriously in Organizations

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AIN'T MISBEHAVIN': TAKING PLAY SERIOUSLY IN ORGANIZATIONS

Abstract

In response to the dominant logic that characterizes play as frivolous and only marginally relevant, this paper attempts to develop a theoretical framework that will allow play to be taken seriously in organizations. Psychological, sociological, anthropological and philosophical literature streams are reviewed to establish a coherent understanding of the emotional, social and cognitive benefits of play. A net of semantic distinctions is then introduced to differentiate play from work, and play is presented formally as *imaginative, ethical* and *autotelic*. This analysis is then embedded in the organizational literature to show the implications of play for innovation, collective mind and continuous learning.

In their polemic *Organizational Misbehavior* (1999), Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson examine a category of activities which they define as "anything you do at work you are not supposed to do." According to their analysis, 'misbehaviors' such as loafing and practical joking involve a more or less explicit form of employee resistance to management. This critical analysis raises a series of questions that extend beyond the authors' antagonistic characterization of organizational dynamics. Is there not a category of activities which have vital importance for organizations even though their purposes and processes may be qualitatively different from that which, under normal circumstances, you are supposed to do at *work*? For example, with regard to a sake-drenched debauch when negotiating parties show their true colors and establish the trust required to settle the deal, the term *work* seems woefully inadequate, yet few could dispute the importance of the 'nemawashi' activity itself. And to be sure, now that the Taylorist dream of a perfectly machined organization has proven impracticable and the function of 'human relations' has been widely established, there exists a wide range of familiar, even mundane examples of such activities: ropes courses, office birthday parties, initiation rituals, casual Fridays, annual seminars held on golf resorts, etc. In reference to that which 'you are not supposed to do' we may even justifiably cite scenario planning and skunk works, which are so contrary to the normal working organization that they must be kept physically separate (Peters 1984). So how are we to understand these organizational behaviors which are qualitatively different from, even contradictory to the behaviors sanctioned under the auspices of *work*? And in view of the fact that such behaviors are so widespread and so intricately connected to organizational performance, how might their purposes and processes be coherently understood?

This paper advances the notion that such behaviors can be fruitfully considered as *play.* Play is a natural human activity that has been widely acknowledged to have significant emotional, social and cognitive benefits, yet its role in organizations has not been comprehensively researched or understood. Our practical and theoretical familiarity with play in organizations has been limited by a dominant logic (Prahalad and Bettis 1986, 1995) that casts play as a frivolous activity with no purpose other than enjoyment and therefore only peripheral relevance to the productive life of adults. On the contrary, in view of the activities cited above we suspect play happens all the time in organizations, that people in organizations engage in play with a sense of purpose, and that in addition to providing enjoyment, play can serve the purpose of adding significant value to organizational life. In order

theoretically to explain and practically to derive this value, we must first overcome the dominant logic and develop a positive, coherent concept of play in organizations. Toward that end, we begin with a review of the concept of play as it has been understood in adjacent bodies of literature, including psychology, sociology, anthropology and philosophy. From this comparative analysis we derive three basic characteristics—*imaginative, ethical* and *autotelic*—which we believe can serve provisionally to distinguish 'play' from 'work' in organizations. We argue that this definition can allow play to be taken more seriously in organizations, especially in the context of the existing literatures on creativity and the imagination, collective mind, and learning.

THE CONCEPT OF PLAY

The incredible diversity of activities referred to as 'play' has given rise to an equally wide range of theories that seek to explain the purposes and processes of the activities themselves. These theoretical perspectives have been understood most generally as 'rhetorics' which function both descriptively and normatively to explain and perpetuate certain forms of social and cultural activity (Sutton-Smith, 1997). At this general level, contrasting categories of human activity include 'love', 'interpretation' or 'meaning-making' and 'science', but in the context of organizations the most direct point of contrast is certainly 'work' (Fink 1979). At first glance, this contrast between work and play may appear to involve a relationship of mutual exclusivity, where whatever is work is categorically not play, and vice versa. This simple opposition carries a strong set of embedded value assumptions (e.g., work=good, play=bad) that have been shown to derive from the modern cultural and economic heritage of Protestant capitalism (Weber 1958). But while positivist, rationalist traditions of management thought have been broadly critiqued, still the relationship between work and play remains under-defined and tenuous. This lack of definition pertains especially to the practitioner-oriented human resources manuals that claim the secret to business performance is 'having fun!' The endeavor to define play in organizations therefore requires the establishment of a semantic net within which the relationship between work and play may be more coherently understood. The following section of this paper reviews the adjacent psychological, sociological, anthropological and philosophical literatures in an attempt to identify the intrinsic, formal characteristics of play. This

theory-building exercise will result in a clarification of the distinctions between work and play and, in turn, it will allow play to be taken more seriously in organizations.

Psychology. The psychological importance of play has been understood in several distinct, but interrelated contexts. First, play has been shown to develop the capacity for logical operations (Piaget 1958). For example, basic processes such as assimilation (through which new perceptual phenomena are rationalized to fit with existing concepts) and accommodation (through which existing concepts are extended and transformed in light of new phenomena) have been shown to develop in children through play activities (Piaget 1958). Cognitive processes such as these have been understood as the primary means through which individuals interact with the world, and this stream of theory holds that the mature, adult cognitive framework takes form as increasingly complex logical operations are enacted through play activities. An adjacent stream of research also emphasizes the developmental character of play, but claims that the capacity to understand meaning in culturally-specific contexts is as crucial as the capacity to understand purely logical operations (Vygotsky 1978). According to this equally influential perspective, humans in early childhood cannot yet distinguish between the real and the hypothetical, and thus cannot properly be said to have an imagination. The capacity for imagination is thus developed through play activities, which begin with direct mimicry of adult behaviors (e.g., playing dolls) that require only the most simple, constitutive rules (e.g., 'do like Mommy does'). As the individual matures, the rules become more overt and complex (e.g., move the bishop diagonally across the chessboard), and as the imagination becomes more developed, the behavior that is being mimicked becomes ever more covert and hypothetical (e.g., protecting the king from your opponent). In this fashion, through play the individual develops an ability to make and understand meaning within cultural contexts that are framed by more or less complex and explicit rules.

Furthermore, psychologists have recognized that cognition in accordance with logical rules as well as imagining complex contexts for meaning depend on an emotional sense of competence and fulfillment that is, in turn, also developed through play activities (Erikson 1963). This line of consideration has lead to the use of play as a method for assessment and therapy, especially with regard to catharsis (Klein, M. 1932) and transition (Winnicott 1971). In such clinical applications, play is deployed as a

process through which individuals overcome perceived obstacles and become aware of potential spaces for development and fulfillment. In this light, play seems to hold great promise for adults in organizations, and certainly the theoretical basis for play-based adventure activities such as ropes courses derives from these psychological sources (Priest 1992; Czikszentmihalyi 1975; Ellis 1973). However, in view of our attempt to build a theory of play in organizations that can account for phenomena as seemingly diverse as playing solitaire on the computer and strategic scenario planning, let it suffice to emphasize at this preliminary juncture that the psychological literature addresses play primarily as a developmental activity through which people become cognitively and emotionally mature.

Sociology. As with the psychological literature, the concept of play has been dealt with by sociologists from several distinct, but interrelated standpoints. According to the field's landmark conception of the dynamic relationship between self and society, play is a process through which individuals become familiar with societal symbols, identify themselves in relation to others, and acquire skills required to function effectively in the social community (Mead 2001). Generally speaking, the sociological literature emphasizes the extent to which the concept of self involves seeing oneself as an other. In this sense, the individual who plays is always playing-at-something, or imagining the self 'as if' it were other. Individuals thus develop and adapt in social contexts through processes whereby the self is imagined as something apparently other than what it is. Working from these basic insights, an important stream of research explores the relationship between particular forms and modes of play activity and the overall structure and significance of society at large. One of the most influential and far-reaching investigations in this regard pointed out that play has contributed greatly to the formation of civilization as such, influencing and giving rise to institutions such as war, law, art and philosophy (Huizenga 1950). Another influential project sought to develop an heuristic taxonomy of possible social attitudes through an investigation of different attitudes exhibited by individuals who play games (Caillois 1961). Extensive research has also been dedicated to support the socio-biological notion that play activities allow society to adapt and survive (Smith 1982). While the scientific legitimacy of such claims is subject to considerable debate, even theorists who acknowledge the essential ambiguity of the concept of play nevertheless argue that play is "the primary place for the expression of anything that is humanly imaginable", and in turn, that it is

precisely the flexible character of play activities that best allows for the "potentiation of adaptive variability" for the social human organism (Sutton-Smith 1997: 226, 231). In other words, through play, humans imagine new possibilities for society and become more able to bring those possibilities into lived reality.

Further streams of sociological research investigate the empirical aspects of social life that seem most directly shaped by play as well as the communicative processes through which both play and non-play activities are framed. At one level, scholars have focused on empirical play activities to illustrate and critique the dynamics through which social identity is formed. For example, particular forms of play have been shown to influence the construction and perception of gender identity (Klein, A.A. 1993; Ignicio, 1990). Similarly, popular sports have been compellingly presented as intricately connected to the construction and perpetuation of national identities and ideologies (Tomlinson 1989; WuDunn 1996). Somewhat more radically, scholars inspired by Foucault's notion of discursive regimes (1977) have underscored ways in which relationships of power are formed and transformed through play, even going so far as to develop intellectual historical accounts of Western society and civilization as a clash between rational, orderly play concepts and 'pre-rational', chaotic play concepts (Spariosu 1989). At another level, sociologists have also examined play as a metaphor for human communication, demonstrating that the rule-based frames that are imagined through play also serve to organize the individual's experience of society (Goffman 1974). Following this logic, the experience of play develops not only the capacity to understand meaning in contexts, but also to recognize social rules and to act and communicate in accordance with them.

Moreover, the question of the certainty or uncertainty with which such rules may be known sufficiently to guide rational decisions has inspired the rich, socio-economic tradition of game theory (von Neumann and Morgenstern 1944). On this model, anytime individuals and groups make decisions and take actions, they formally or informally estimate the rational probability of certain means leading to certain ends. From a systems theory perspective, sociologists have recognized that the human social condition involves multiple layers of irreducible complexity, and that the rationality that enables decision-making is itself bounded within the context of meaning (Simon 1957). The risk associated with social play is thus incalculable, but the communicative process through which humans create

frames for meaning and action is self-productive and transformative over historical time (Luhmann 1993). In order to bring this intriguing point back into the present focus, we can note that it raises questions concerning the extent to which the 'infinite' play (Carse 1994) activities through which social reality is constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1987) might be understood as a complex adaptive behavior in organizations (Oliver and Roos 2000). In any case, let it suffice at this juncture to emphasize that the sociological literature addresses play primarily as an activity through which social relationships are developed and adapted.

Anthropology. With respect to the psychological and sociological perspectives outlined above, the anthropological literature does not fundamentally challenge the notion of play as a natural human activity through which individuals develop and adapt emotionally, socially and intellectually. Instead, anthropologists direct their questions toward the culture that is being developed and adapted through play. In this regard, play is characterized as a cultural activity through which a society frames itself narratively in contrast to an image of its own alterity, thereby renewing and transforming its own identity through ritualized cultural practice. On this point, researchers debate whether the activity of play is structurally similar or not across boundaries of apparent cultural difference, and by extension, whether over time ritual processes reify or transform the identity of the culture that has framed the play activity as such.

For example, empirical play activities have been investigated as processes through which specific cultures encounter aesthetic, moral and metaphysical inversions of what is generally understood to be their identity (Geertz 1973). This theory accounts for such inversions not simply as aberrant behaviors, but rather as processes through which a culture collectively imagines itself as other to itself, thus engaging in reflection on its own identity and the values that sustain it. Some scholars adopt a more structuralist viewpoint on this issue and claim that the excesses of play serve as a necessary counterpoint to work, sustaining and reinforcing the overall order of the society (Bakhtin 1984). Others take a more hermeneutical perspective and claim that play is an expressive, or narrative activity through which the collective, cultural identity is constructed by the participants (especially following Gadamer 1982). Either way, not only does the individual imagine the self as other in play (as indicated by the psychological and sociological research), but the entire cultural

context within which an individual comes to understand the meaning of self-other relationships is, at another level of scale, imagined through collective play activities. Play activities therefore serve to organize culture with respect to concrete, historically particular situations which are themselves subject to irrevocable change. In this sense, rather than posing a simple, albeit vital counterpoint to productive work, play allows people to create and recreate cultural identity in light of their present, contingent reality, and only in light of this identity can the purposes of work be identified and pursued.

The anthropological literature has furthermore identified certain distinct elements in the narration and transformation of cultural identity through play. For example, anthropologists argue that ritual play generates cultural identity precisely to the extent that it involves 'liminality'—namely, social phenomena that "1) fall in the interstices of the social structure, 2) are on its margins, or 3) occupy its lowest rungs" (Turner 1969: 125). On this analysis, whenever a culture constructs itself through play activities by imagining an alternate image of itself, this alternate image draws direct attention to the liminal aspects of the culture being constructed. Interestingly, this refocusing of attention can produce "revolutionary strivings for renewed communitas" (Turner 1969: 129). In other words, when a culture constructs its own identity through play, it confronts aspects of itself which are marginalized outside the ritual frame, and this confrontation can produce deeply ambivalent results. On one hand, the fact that the liminal elements of society are present (and even considered sacred) in ritual play "is like playing with fire only not getting burned" (Geertz 1972: 440). 'Not getting burned' here means that the social order is maintained precisely through an encounter with its own margins. On the other hand however, the 'communitas' at issue in play is not simply an abstract ideology or aspirational goal, but also involves existential immediacy and normative systems of control (Turner 1969). In this sense, the cultural stakes of play are quite high, and the 'revolutionary strivings' brought about through play activities can be the source of actual transformation and upheaval. In view of the potentially volatile and ambiguous power of such activities, it remains a highly unsettled question whether such striving can be proven to be adaptively effective, or valuable on the whole by any measure. Thus, while the anthropological research identifies play as a narrative activity through which a culture frames and adapts its identity, the ultimate purpose and comparative value of particular forms of cultural identity are left to debate. In any case, anthropologists have shown that while play may be completely 'unproductive' in the sense that it results in no direct value artifact (in the way that, say, work and art

should), nevertheless it can produce certain higher-order benefits for cultures as well as for individuals. In summary then, the anthropological literature addresses play primarily as a narrative process through which cultural identity is created and transformed. For organizations then, in what way should the essential ambiguity of play be understood?

Philosophy. The concept of play arises in philosophical discourse both with regard to metaphysical questions concerning the cosmos and with regard to epistemological and ethical questions concerning humanity. First, play has been considered in ontological terms as a fundamental characteristic of the universe. The notion that the universe consists of a dynamic 'play' of differential forces dates from the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition (Heraclitus 2001) and continues today with complexity and chaos theory (Holland 1998). An influential formulation of this notion characterizes the universe metaphorically as an instance of child's play in which all order emerges, is destroyed over time and then, in turn, is replaced by new, fundamentally different laws and regularities (Nietzsche 1964). This claim is tempered by arguments which maintain that the apparent processes of chaotic transformation visible in the natural, physical world are in fact based on underlying principles of form and order that do not themselves undergo change (Plato 1961; Aristotle 1979). This distinction between an 'apparent' world of 'becoming' and a 'real' world of 'being' has itself undergone significant critique, and thus recent philosophical projects have understood the contingent, dynamic, and 'playful' character of reality in terms of concepts such as difference (Derrida 1978), identity (Heidegger 1969), and alterity (Levinas 1969).

In light of these contemporary debates, it is especially clear that play holds a corresponding epistemological and ethical significance as well. For example, a range of scholars have argued that if we presuppose a dynamic, chaotic universe, then no foundation for human values remains, and thus society devolves not into an natural idyll of irenic play but into an amoral war of all against all (e.g., Enzensberger 1994). In response, others have claimed that the call for metaphysical foundationalism always involves an association between particular forms of knowledge and particular forms of power, and by contrast, that a truly ethical society can only arise if all parties acknowledge the inherently playful character of meaning and communication (Rorty 1991). More broadly however, following the rise of the modern scientific conception of reality, a great effort has been made to identify that aspect

of humanity which distinguishes us from the physically-determined natural world. In this regard, the faculty of reason or rationality has been repeatedly identified as a necessary and sufficient condition for humanity as such. Thinkers in the Enlightenment tradition (Kant 1950; Schiller 1983) have argued that an essential component of human rationality is the capacity to imagine the world 'as if' it were different from empirically-manifest reality. The human imagination has been shown to involve the 'playful' construction of abstract, even fantastic ideas that differ from empirical sense data (Kearney 1988). But in a corollary line of argument, philosophers have demonstrated that the imagination serves a greater function than the generation of mere fantasy. The freedom of the will has also been identified as that aspect of humanity which differentiates us from the causal determinism that governs the world around us (Kant 1950). On this analysis, our free will is precisely that which allows us to confront situations that are governed by material causality and nevertheless make choices and take action. However, whenever we judge the value of such decisions and actions as good or bad, we must refer to ethical principles which require both imagination as well as understanding. Indeed, following this argument even the notion of 'common sense' refers not to a common understanding based on compulsory agreement, but rather to the possibility of reaching such agreement due to the fact that all people may similarly enjoy the free play of imagination in harmony with the understanding (Kant 1987). Thus while on the level of sociological and anthropological analysis the activity of play has been shown to give rise to particular forms of social interaction as well as cultural identity, on the level of philosophical analysis, the playful imagination functions as a condition of the possibility of ethical judgment. We are thus compelled to acknowledge a playful aspect of human existence whether we believe that the universe plays along with us or not. And indeed, whether we believe that play activities produce good or bad at the level of culture, the philosophical literature demonstrates that without our playful imagination, we could not begin to recognize ethical principles much less act in accordance with them.

Play in Organizations. The preceding literature review dealt with the concept of play as it has been understood in literature streams adjacent to organizational studies. Since it is impossible within the parameters of this current project to adequately address each and every 'rhetoric' of play, we have sought to identify general themes and insights with direct relevance to organizations. Our interest remains in developing a coherent theory that can explain the benefits of those organizational activities

which are easily recognized as play, while providing a framework within which other organizational activities which have not yet been considered as play may fruitfully be described and examined as such. Toward that end, we have in summary found that the different scholarly perspectives on play have the following general implications for organizations.

For organizations, the overall implication of the psychological literature is that play activities allow people to develop the cognitive and emotional 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 and relationships necessary for work. The anthropological literature demonstrates that play allows people to develop and adapt cultural identities, 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, which can in turn effectively guide work activity. In light of these preliminary conclusions, the dominant logic which relegates play to the margins of organizational studies cannot legitimately be sustained. It seems that the relationship between play and work cannot be considered as mutually exclusive, and that any coherent theory of organizational life must account both for work and for play. But what exactly is the relationship between work and play?

As we begin to explore this question, a rough but suggestive composite concept of play in organizations emerges from our review of adjacent literatures. Play is a mode of activity that involves imagining new forms of individual and collective identity. Within the special frame of play, people develop emotionally, socially and cognitively, building skills and establishing ethical principles to guide actions. In turn, the skills and principles that emerge through the play activity can have adaptive or transformative effects for the individual and the collective in other contexts. Turning now directly to the context of organizations, it seems that play may be significantly more than a superficial gimmick that organizations can sanction within clearly-defined parameters in order to ease interpersonal tensions and thereby increase productivity. Following the anthropological literature, it seems instead that play might serve an integral role in determining the purposes of work itself. But how exactly do ritual play activities function to create forms of cultural identity that, in turn, frame and determine the purposes of work? Following the philosophical literature, it seems that the human capacity to judge

which purpose for work is 'right' and which purpose is 'wrong' depends the capacity of our playful imagination to recognize ethical principles in the first place. But how exactly does the capacity to play give rise to the ethical principles that guide work activities? In light of such questions, the organizational literature could benefit immensely from a coherent theory that distinguished play from work and indicated precisely how play can lead to adaptive and transformative benefits for organizations. The following section of this paper will begin to elaborate this theory.

TAKING PLAY SERIOUSLY IN ORGANIZATIONS

From our introduction we recall the definition of organizational misbehavior as "anything you do at work you are not supposed to do" (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). While this attempt to define a certain category of activities is provocative, we find that it presupposes an unnecessarily uniform and hegemonic concept of 'what you are supposed to do'. We suggest that the rules and norms that govern organizational life are in fact irreducibly complex, varying at different times and under different circumstances for different individuals. Our interest is therefore directed toward certain behaviors that seem consistently to occur (whether surreptitiously, idly or under special sanction) even though their purposes and processes may be qualitatively different from those behaviors which make up the 'work' of the organization. As indicated above, common examples of these behaviors include: recreational sports leagues, retirement dinners, happy hours, recognition events, etc. At the same time, as the exemplary list of such behaviors extends to include activities like skunk works, scenario planning and even war games, it becomes clear that such activities do not simply provide frivolous enjoyment, but rather to enhance, drive or even set the overall standards for the performance of the organization itself. Our interest in play in organizations therefore requires an explanatory framework for those activities which differ qualitatively from work yet purposefully benefit the organization. We believe the significance of this qualitative distinction as well as the nature of its purposes can be indicated by three criteria derived from the literature reviewed above: *imaginative, ethical* and *autotelic*.

Imaginative. Psychological research indicates that activities which require individuals to imagine increasingly abstract or complex rules and contexts for meaning result in the development of cognitive and emotional capacities. Sociological research indicates that the capacity to imagine oneself 'as'

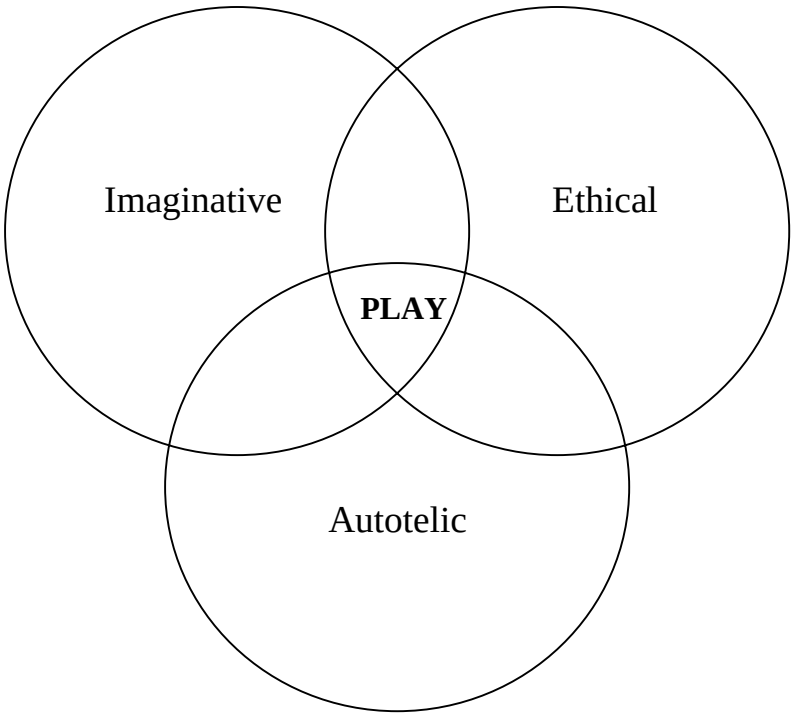
another is the basis from which social relationships developed, and anthropological research emphasizes that cultural identities are themselves the emergent property of collective processes of imagination. Philosophy confirms that without the imagination, humans would be unable to formulate and adhere to ethical principles. In play, people imagine the world differently, constructing alternative frames for meaning and interaction as well as alternative forms of individual and collective identity. In organizations, play activities may involve imagining different forms of organization, exploring alternative modes of sense-making and social interaction, and constructing new forms of possible identity for the organization itself.

Ethical. The imaginative character of play in organizations opens up a frame for experience and meaning which is qualitatively distinct from 'what you are (normally) supposed to do' in organizations. This frame is established and maintained so long as the individuals engaged in the play continue to respect the hypothetical 'as if' character of the imaginative activity. Following the psychological example above, the play continues only so long as its constitutive rules are respected, but in this case rather than 'do as Mommy does', the most simple, basic rule is 'keep imagining'. As the rules become more complex, typically they distinguish between right and wrong actions as well as clarify the relationships between the individuals involved. But however simple or complex the rules may be, they function absolutely as ethical principles for those individuals who are involved with the play activity. If the individuals cease to respect the most basic 'as if' character of the activity, then the play is over. Phrased more dramatically, people must maintain a very clear distinction between 'normal' work and 'special' play, and within the special frame of play their speech and actions are bound by an ethical restriction that cannot be broken without discontinuing the activity itself. Recalling a point raised by the psychological and sociological literatures, a bite cannot really be a bite within the frame of play, but rather it serves to communicate the significance of a bite without having the actual effect of a bite, namely the causation of pain (Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974). Now, in some organizational contexts the nature of the relationship between the imaginary and the real may be perfectly clear, and the play ceases altogether (or becomes 'work') as soon as the constitutive rules are broken. In other contexts however, the play activity itself may call on participants to imagine new possibilities for considering the difference between the real and the imaginary. Individuals may in fact consciously play in order to define the purpose of their everyday activities (Turner 1982). Thus, the question of what is real or

imaginary at the level of an organization's collective identity becomes difficult to answer definitively—the 'framing' of different activities may even appear not as play but rather as work itself. What then is the crucial point of distinction between play and work, and how should we conceive of play activities that take place in organizations?

Autotelic. Whereas *imaginative* and *ethical* are necessary conditions of play, they are not sufficient to distinguish the category of activities from work insofar as work activities may also involve hypothetical speculations as well as a respect for principles that determine right from wrong. However, it is important to note that work is by definition a means to an end. Work produces value. People work in order to obtain the value that is produced by work, whether that value be measured in terms of money, success, self-satisfaction or other criteria. And whether the work is successful in the production of value, nevertheless people work with the intent to do so. Play, by contrast, produces no value artefact beyond itself. The literature is resoundingly clear on this point, and according to Caillois even the most desperate gambler must recognize that when the game is over, the value of one person's winnings can be no greater than the value of another person's losses (1961). Play can have no goal or outcome outside of the frame of the activity itself. Play is an end in itself, and this *autotelic* characteristic distinguishes play definitively from other organizational behaviors. *Imaginative* and *ethical* are necessary conditions of play, but only when an activity is *autotelic* as well can it sufficiently fulfill the definition of play. The logic of this claim is presented here in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1



The autotelic characteristic of play thus differentiates play activities from all goal-oriented, 'work' activities in organizations. In one sense, the establishment of this distinction raises far more questions that it answers about organizational behavior. What kinds of telic, 'work' behaviors might be considered imaginative but not ethical? Similarly, what kinds of 'work' behaviors might be considered ethical but not imaginative? We could venture to respond 'creativity' and 'routine' respectively to these questions, and although such speculation is relevant, it would require a great deal more conceptual clarification and analysis. Even more interestingly, what organizational behaviors might be considered both imaginative and ethical, but are not undertaken purely for their own sake? Here it is tempting to suggest that 'knowledge work' or 'craft' activities such as strategic scenario planning are most closely aligned with play, though they retain the determinate purpose of promoting the survival or advancement of the enterprise. By contrast, with regard to those behaviors which are autotelic but neither imaginative nor ethical, should they be considered as idleness, leisure or fantasy? Perhaps yes, but for our present purposes it suffices to point out that play should not be mistakenly equated with such terms. In the context of organizations, the term 'play' should refer precisely to those organizational behaviors which are imaginative, ethical and autotelic.

In light of our literature review, when we consider those organizational behaviors which are undertaken imaginatively and ethically but without a determinate purpose, we are compelled to consider how such behaviors might possibly lead to the emergence of value at different levels of scale. In order to clarify exactly how an activity that by definition cannot be intended to produce anything outside of itself can nevertheless have benefits for organizations, it is necessary to emphasize a further, ontological distinction. The ontology of play is not that of rational, unchanging natural laws, but rather that of uncertainty, complexity and chaos. For example, the cunning and skill of a chess grandmaster involves the strategic capacity to anticipate possible configurations and respond accordingly, but the rules that constitute the play make it fundamentally impossible for one person to win every time. In fact, if it were possible to eliminate that element of uncertainty, to truly master the game and 'produce' victory on every occasion, then the play would cease to exist as such. Because of this inherent uncertainty, play cannot produce value in the same way that work does, and

it cannot be considered as a direct means to any particular end. Indeed, as soon as an organization attributes any specific instrumentality or productivity to the activity in question, then the imaginative, 'as if' character of the activity is foregone, the constitutive ethical characteristic is rejected, and by definition it ceases to be play. In other words, although we have reviewed the *possible* benefits of play activities at some length, if people organizations play *in order to* adapt or transform, then the activity has a determinate or 'real' goal, and it cannot be considered as play. However, we suggest that it is precisely this ontology of uncertainty and complexity that allows the possible benefits of play to emerge *at different levels of scale*, that is, *beyond the frame* of the activity itself.

Thus, people who play in organizations must accept a certain paradox of intentionality. Organizations seeking adaptation or transformative change simply cannot predetermine certain desired strategic outcomes and engage in play activities with the intent to achieve those outcomes. Play is not a production machine. Rather, organizations engage in play activities *for their own sake* and recognize that the desired transformation may or may not happen in any case. While this tactic may at first seem contradictory to the very essence of organizational and management theory which seeks to clarify the strategic intent of management and implement it throughout the organization, Ashby's law of requisite variety suggests that management theory itself may need to become more playful (1956). This basic tenet of complex adaptive systems theory states that a system's ability to compensate for change in the environment depends on the variety of actions which are available to it internally. Thus at an ontological level, the organization's ability to adapt to change depends on the range of its strategic alternatives. Although play activities by definition have no direct, productive outcomes, they do involve imagining alternative forms of organization, and these alternatives may provide significant benefits beyond the frame of the activities themselves, especially as the organization faces change. In this regard, it is important to note that the literature review demonstrates that the possible, emergent benefits of play may not be limited to one aspect of the organization, but can pertain to the emotional and cognitive dimensions of the individual, to the social bonds and relations between individuals, to the overall identity of an organizational culture, and to the fundamental principles that guide decisions concerning the purpose of work itself. At this point then, the outstanding question becomes "What are the emergent impacts, benefits and risks when people engage in imaginative, ethical and most importantly autotelic play behaviors in organizations?"

PLAY IN ORGANIZATIONS: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The concept of play in organizations that we have provisionally developed here needs to be applied through research on forms of organizational behavior in order to establish its descriptive and explanatory legitimacy. It is nevertheless possible to draw a series of conclusions from the foregoing literature review and analysis. First, in response to the dominant logic which casts play as frivolous and only marginally important, the literature review suggests that play deserves more legitimacy in the world of organizations. Indeed, it is clear that certain common activities, although they may differ from the activities traditionally associated with work, cannot be adequately understood in theory if we presume that they serve on behalf of employees to subvert or resist the strategic intent of management. In a simple phrase, play in organizations *ain't* necessarily *misbehavin'.* On the contrary, our analysis of play emphasizes that imaginative, ethical and autotelic activities can possibly allow emotional, social and cognitive benefits to emerge.

Moreover, this theory of play in organizations calls for a rethinking of the significance and value of certain organizational activities in practice. On one hand, the apparently frivolous has to be taken more seriously. Granted, the functional *raison d'être* of human relations has largely been to make the implementation of management's strategic intent more efficient. To that end, birthday parties and casual Fridays have become standard practice in contemporary organizations. But are such activities simply sanctioned subversions of standard practice? We have noted that one stream of the anthropological literature would consider such phenomena (the paradigmatic example being carnival), as structurally integral to the orderly function of a social system or culture. Yet another stream of the anthropological literature seems to suggest that it is precisely through such liminal experiences that people come to associate themselves with a particular cultural identity in the first place, and moreover, that the ritual process of engaging in playful activities is what allows cultures to adapt to change. In other words, not only might play activities allow organizational identity as such to emerge, but they may also help that organization to adapt its purposes in a changing business environment. In this light, the emotional, social and cognitive benefits of play appear to be so significant that they

bear directly on the overall strategic intent of management rather than simply on the means or process of rendering its implementation more efficient.

On the other hand, the apparently strategic should be more seriously playful, i.e., imaginative, ethical and autotelic. Granted, mainstream strategic management theory indicates that strategic innovation requires imagination (De Bono 1992), that continuous operational reliability requires heedful interaction (Weick and Roberts 1993), and that sustaining competitive advantage requires continuous learning throughout the organization (Senge 1990). In practice, the espoused theory does not always seem to match the theory in use. Indeed, organizations tend to resort to planning practices which lock in to focus on pre-determined contingencies, thereby stifling the imagination and reducing strategic innovation. Organizations tend to engage in implementation processes such as the 'cascade' or the 'roll-out' which prescribe a given set of decisions and actions to individual managers rather than guiding them to heed each other and make ethical decisions in real time. Finally, organizations tend to follow knowledge management practices which treat knowledge as a finite object rather than as an open-ended, nonlinear learning process. In the context of such activities, taking play seriously in organizations draws attention toward those activities that foster continuous learning by a) cultivating requisite variety using the power of the human imagination and b) encouraging heedful respect for shared ethical principles. How then might the emergent emotional, social and cognitive benefits of play enable organizations strategically to survive and advance in complex business environments? Conversely, recalling the fundamental ambivalence noted in the anthropological literature, might play activities inherently carry risks to the strategic success of an enterprise?

However such questions may be settled, in any case, the potential impact of play in organizations in complex business environments merits additional consideration. Our theoretical analysis indicates that future empirical research on play in organizations should draw on three existing streams of organizational literature: strategic innovation, collective mind, and continuous learning. These performance-critical issues have been clearly identified in the literature, but it remains exceedingly difficult to establish how they may be cultivated in practice. In this regard, we believe that the concept of play may a) explain more coherently why certain extant organizational behaviors are associated

with strategic innovation, collective mind and continuous learning, and b) guide the development of new forms of organization that allow innovation, collective mind and continuous learning to emerge in practice.

First, the *imaginative* characteristic of play means that it is closely related to innovation. A great deal of research has been devoted precisely to establishing the connection between imagination, creativity and innovation (De Bono 1992; Stacey 1996). So can play be used systematically and deliberately to generate innovation? As we have shown above in Diagram 1, the answer is no. Furthermore, we suggest that whenever play is conscripted in the name of 'creativity' to produce strategic innovation, it ceases to be playful at all. To the contrary, it is precisely the complex ontology of play that makes it impossible to expect it to produce new ideas that will improve an organization's competitive position without fail. People engage in play activities primarily for their own sake, not for the sake of fulfilling a strict managerial mandate to create a future where none may exist. And yet, although the *autotelic* characteristic of play may at first glance seem to render it useless to organizations, it is precisely the requisite variety of the strategic alternatives which are imagined that can lead to emergent benefits at a different level of scale outside the frame of the activity itself. And again, the most important thing about the variety of what is imagined is that it pertains to the individual and collective *identity* of the organization. In this light, the possible emergent benefits of play for organizations extend far beyond the capacity to develop a compelling new product design (e.g., Schrage 2000) or a flashy new advertising campaign, beyond even any particular strategic goal or target. People that play seriously in organization may open themselves up to a process through which the overall significance of who they are as individuals or as a collective may be transformed or adapted. Through this complex, nonlinear process of identity formation, the context and purpose of work itself may in turn change dramatically. As we noted above, the value that is produced by work may be measured using different criteria, and the relative value associated with particular criteria (e.g., money v. self-satisfaction) depends entirely on the identity of the individual in question. The point about play is not that it leads directly to competitive advantage or self-satisfaction, but that it refers to activities through which individuals imagine themselves differently, relate to other people differently, and construct alternative criteria by which the value of work in the organization can be measured. In this light, future research should investigate whether play in organizations might involve a continuous and integrated

activity of innovating the organizational identity purely for its own sake. More practically speaking, we suggest that organizations might begin to engage in processes of strategic innovation by playfully entertaining the question: "Who are we?"

Second, this question "who are we?" extends the scope of the need for innovation such that it appears to include not only the overall cultural identity of the organization, but also the relationships and interactions between individuals as well as the capacity of individuals to make sense of information and create meaning for themselves in particular contexts. The concept of collective mind (Weick and Roberts 1993) has been used to describe performance-critical processes of heedful interaction in which members of a group cognitively represent, contribute to and subordinate themselves to the group as a whole. Researchers have found compelling evidence that associates collective mind with sustained processes of innovation (Dougherty 1998), with efficiency of operations (Crowston and Kammerer 1998) and with the discovery of tacit considerations in management strategy processes (Brockman and Anthony 1998). The concept of collective mind has thus proven quite powerful as an explanation of how a coherent group identity can lead to effective performance. The lingering questions in this literature stream are "by what process do we become who we are?" and "by what process should we sustain who we are?" But just as play develops the capacity in the child to make sense of information within certain bounded contexts, play activities in organizations may develop the capacity in a team or group to share a collective identity, and through this process, a group may become better able to sustain its identity even in situations when the context for tangible activities has changed beyond the scope of the existing, planned strategy. And perhaps most importantly, since play activities are constituted by rules which cannot be broken without bringing a halt to the activities themselves, participating individuals must continuously subordinate themselves to the ethical principle which they have commonly accepted. At its simplest, the constitutive rule of play is "keep imagining", but even this basic restriction mediates the relationship between individuals, requiring each of them to respect themselves and each other in the interest of sustaining the imaginative activity. Future research should therefore investigate whether ethically respecting each other and sustaining such imaginative processes through play activities allows teams and groups to access the sources of resilience which sustain collective mind (Weick 1993).

Finally, organizational scholars have increasingly suggested that learning is a capacity or resource which can enable firms to achieve and sustain superior performance (Senge 1990; Pfeffer 1994). At the same time however, others argue that learning practices within organizations have remained too focused on specific behaviors to provide any truly strategic benefit (Beer, Eisenstat and Biggadike 1996). And perhaps more problematically, scholars still struggle to define and achieve "the attitude of wisdom" relevant to the "fluid world [in which] wise people know that they don't fully understand what is happening right now, because they have never seen precisely this event before" (Weick 1993). How then should we understand learning processes as such, if the goal is not to produce specific outcomes, but to educate wise people who, following a Socratic ideal, 'know that they know nothing'? Our analysis suggests that play activities may involve autotelic learning processes through which organizations can develop the capacity to adapt strategically and in a coordinated and coherent manner to change. It seems tempting at this point to speculate whether or not, as play activities increase the requisite variety of strategic options which are known to individuals and groups in organizations, a state of collective preparedness might emerge. And furthermore, if the play activity has engaged the emotional, social and cognitive dimensions of the participating individuals, might that state of preparedness amount to something like wisdom? Weick claims that "wisdom is an attitude taken by persons toward the beliefs, values, knowledge, information, abilities and skills that are held, a tendency to doubt that these are necessarily true or valid and to doubt that they are an exhaustive set of those things that could be known" (1993). In this light, organizational wisdom should not be mistaken for the skill necessary to perform a certain action, nor the capacity to implement a certain objective. Instead, organizational wisdom appears as a kind of 'cunning intelligence' (Detienne & Vernant 1978) that continually seeks to imagine and improvise actions in response to both familiar and unfamiliar circumstances. Future research into organizational learning should not view knowledge instrumentally as an object or resource of which a firm could possibly have more or less. Instead, researchers should focus on how organizations can encourage individuals to adopt an attitude of openness, poise and curiosity that refuses to be satisfied that the goal of learning has been achieved, even as they imagine solutions to problems that may not yet exist in reality. In sum, future research should investigate whether taking play seriously in organizations might provide a natural and practical way for people to engage in open-ended processes of continuous learning.

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