Ambiguity at Work
Scenario Development through Serious Play

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Abstract: *The challenge facing scenario planning has been conceptualized in terms of uncertainty in the external environment. From a social constructionist viewpoint, this challenge can be re-framed in terms of ambiguity at the level of different, even contradictory interpretations of the organization itself. In this light, the activity of scenario planning appears as a process of enactment in which the organization and its environment are constructed through the discursive, social interactions of participants. We propose that such processes of enactment may be enabled through serious play, and we present a case focused on a strategy team from a major European telecommunications firm to illustrate this claim.*[•]

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Scenario planning has become a well-established concept in strategic management studies (e.g. De Wit & Meyer, 2001; Guth, 1985; Montgomery & Porter, 1991). In this literature, the uncertainty that derives from contingencies in external variables is conceived of as the most prominent challenge for strategic management. In reponse to this uncertainty, scenario development involves an exploration of reasonably possible avenues for the future (e.g. Schoemaker, 1993, 1995; Schwartz, 1991; Van der Heijden, 1996; Hodgkinson & Wright, 2002).

From a social constructionist viewpoint however (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999), the challenge faced by strategic management is rather one of handling ambiguity in the present (Weick, 1995). In this paper, we explore how this subtle shift in perspective might provide new conceptual and practical opportunities for scenario planning theory and practice. Specifically, we consider scenario development activities as processes of enactment (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Weick, 1969, 1995). Furthermore, we explore concept and practice of serious play (Bourdieu, 1998; Roos & Victor, 1999) and its potential to enable scenario planning activities as processes of enactment. In this regard, we present a case study to illustrate how serious play can allow process participants to create and discover meaning while enhancing the adaptive potential of the organization.

Scenario planning as enactment

Since its invention by Royal Dutch Shell in the early 1970's (Geus, 1988; Wack, 1985a, b), scenario planning has become a well-established concept in strategic management (e.g. De Wit & Meyer, 2001; Guth, 1985; Montgomery & Porter, 1991). Scenario planning is concerned with the process of exploring

adequate responses to what managers perceive as relatively possible futures, by means of critically reviewing managers' mental models in order to trigger imaginative, new competitive arenas (Heracleous, 2003). Thus, the uncertainty of the future is considered a structural feature of the business environment (Wack, 1985a). For scenario planning proponents, uncertainty concerns "the extent to which the causal structure of a strategically relevant variable is unknown." (Schoemaker, 1997, p. 197). It is assumed that the uncertainty of the future is caused by contingencies in strategically relevant, environmental variables. Consequently, an organization's environment is characterized as a complex, volatile and turbulent external entity whose future cannot reliably be predicted or extrapolated. However, as proponents of scenario planning posit, if there is any chance to bound the future, it is by getting a better understanding of the environment and the causal relationships of its key variables rather than by assuming its predictability (e.g. Goodwin & Wright, 2001; Ringland, 1998; Schoemaker & Gunther, 2002; Van der Heijden, 1996).

Thus notwithstanding the prevalence of quantitative approaches such as trend analysis and forecasting that aim at approximating the future through probabilistic calculus, scenario planning theorists reject the notion of a predictable future. Scenario planning processes rather aim at exploring and understanding reasonably possible avenues for the future, including especially the implications of these avenues for organizational action and decisions (Goodwin & Wright, 2001). Hence, scenarios have been defined as "focused descriptions of fundamentally different futures presented in coherent script-like or narrative fashion" (Schoemaker, 1993, p. 195). A complementary functional definition identifies scenario planning as a tool "for ordering one's perceptions

about alternative future environments in which one's decisions might be played out" (Schwartz, 1991, p. 4).

In this light, the benefit of scenario development processes consists not in the achievement of a high degree of mutual exclusion or exhaustiveness, but rather, in the integration of a wide range of different, even contradicting viewpoints (Schwartz, 1991). The collective, participatory process of developing scenarios has been described by Schwartz (1991) as follows. Having identified the key strategic issue that is then to be traced through the entire process, key forces in the environment (i.e., key stakeholders) need to be sketched out. Once basic trends and their resulting key uncertainties are formulated, initial scenarios can then be drafted and subsequently checked for consistency and plausibility. The selected scenarios are then to be explored in more detail through an assessment of their impact on the organization and its stakeholders. Based on these considerations, corresponding action and decision scenarios can be developed. Finally, the entire collective process can be captured by writing the narrative of each scenario that will then provide a detailed and rich description for each of the explored scenarios and contingencies. In sum, scenarios as structured narratives of alternative futures allow managers to bound the future by rendering apparent the relationship and relatedness of key environmental variables and by shedding light on the limits of taken-for-granted mental models (Schoemaker, 1997).

In summary, scenario planning aims at handling the future's systematic uncertainty – caused by contingencies in variables in an organization's external environment. Rather than extrapolating the single most likely future, it deliberately aims at rendering visible alternative routes of the future (See Table 1).

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From a social constructionist viewpoint however (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999), scenario planning's initial challenge can be re-framed in terms of ambiguity rather than uncertainty. Ambiguity is, as Weick (1995) argues, characterized as a state of confusion in which different, even contradictory interpretations of the issue at hand or state of affairs exist (Weick, 1995). Moreover, this subtle shift can enable a reconsideration of environmental contingencies as enacted through the discursive interaction of organizational actors rather than as existing independently in an objective, external environment (Weick, 1969). Indeed, if we conceive of organizations as socially constructed systems of shared meaning, then we can claim that organizational actors enact their organization, its environment and its future through social interaction (Daft & Weick, 1984; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Weick, 1995). The notion of enactment furthermore shifts our attention to the processes through which 'the future' and 'the environment' are constructed in discursive processes (McKinley, 2003; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985). Consequently, linguistically or symbolically mediated processes of shared meaning generation require closer attention and investigation by managers who can sharpen "their strategic impact by gaining awareness of the less than obvious values/symbols that pervade their organizations" (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985, p. 730).

On this point, research has demonstrated that metaphors play an important role in processes of enactment as they are intrinsic to the way we think about and know organizations (Grant & Oswick, 1996; Morgan, 1997; Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002; Tsoukas, 1991, 1993). In this regard, Morgan

(1997) emphasizes the relevance of metaphors for processes of enactment as different modes of understanding can be opened "by using different metaphors to bring organizations into focus in different ways. Each metaphor opens a horizon of understanding and enacts a particular view of organizational reality" (1997, p. 427). In terms of their contribution to processes of enactment, metaphors often contribute to transform existing or even generate insights (Grant & Oswick, 1996; Oswick et al., 2002). Their transformative power, it has been argued, stems from their potential to uncover perceptions, attitudes and feelings which until released by metaphor were previously subconscious or unarticulated (Barry, 1994; Marshak, 1993; Sarbin, 1986). For processes of enactment, metaphors serve as important components of the knowledge that organizations have of themselves, and therefore as tools with which managers can better understand their – enacted – organization and environment Thus, Tsoukas (1991) argues, metaphors "do not simply describe an external reality; they also help constitute that reality and prescribe how it ought to be viewed" (1991, p. 570).

Furthermore, research has shown that the spatial, or three-dimensional character of metaphors holds crucial importance for processes of enactment. According to Weick, any attempt to make sense of the environment can be reframed as an attempt of reading a map – or a scenario for our argument – while writing it (1990). In this respect, spatial dimension of organizational concepts seems to be crucial to processes of enactment. Says Weick, "Spatial relatedness is a vivid part of organizational life … Not only do maps emphasize spatial relatedness, they also emphasize classification and the assignment of things to classes." (1990, p. 1).

As a further extension of this line of thought, Doyle & Sims' (2002) have introduced the concept of cognitive sculpting. They convincingly argue that through the richness of images and their physicality those three-dimensional metaphors allow to explicate tacit knowledge regarding 'the organization', 'the environment' or even 'the future'. On a similar line of argument, Buergi & Roos (2003) have outlined how externalizing individual viewpoints by means of three-dimensional metaphors allows for a physical experience of the relatedness of concepts. Thus, employing three-dimensional metaphors in discursive interactions means *literally* constructing the world socially. The impact of such an extension of the use of metaphor in processes of enactment lies with its potential "to make the issue at hand more transitory and plastic" (Huff & Jenkins, 2002, p. 8). By extending our expressive repertoire it might thereby facilitate processes of enactment in instances where language might impede understanding. This is even more relevant as "Companies might be able to enlarge their capacities for novel interpretations by systematically varying metaphors" (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985, p. 732). Our subtle shift in perspective though allows us to reflect on how scenario planning might be fruitfully reconsidered in terms of enactment processes that involve the variation of metaphors employed in an organization (See Table 2).

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Thus the conceptual shift from uncertainty to ambiguity has drawn our attention to processes of enactment, specifically to the role of metaphor and the potential of three-dimensional, spatial metaphors for scenario planning. We are inspired by these streams of research, and yet we find it necessary to pose the

practical and theoretical question of which form of human activity might enhance and encourage such processes. In this regard, we are drawn to the concept and the practice of play.

Scenario planning: A form of 'serious play'?

We now turn to the question of how, in practice, scenario planning might be undertaken in such a way as to allow people in organizations to engage in the socially constructive enactment of their environment in the face of ambiguity. In this regard, we believe that 'serious play' – defined provisionally as an activity in which people purposefully create and discover meaning as they express and actualize that which is humanly imaginable for the organization – might provide a model for such scenario planning activities.

By way of an introduction to this line of thought, and in deference to the predominant conception of play as something fundamentally opposed to the 'serious' business of organizations, it is relevant to take note of those literature streams adjacent to management and organizational studies within which play has been shown to involve somewhat more than a frivolous waste of time. Indeed, psychologists have long recognized that play serves the primary development of cognitive skills such as the capacity to conduct logical operations (especially following Piaget & Inhelder, 1958)) as well as the capacity to understand meaning in specific contexts (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). At another level of analysis, play has been shown to enhance the emotional sense of competence or fulfillment that may serve as a precondition for effective cognitive functioning (Erikson, 1963). Similarly, sociologists and anthropologists have identified the crucial importance of play for the development of the skills generally required to function in social communities (Mead, 2001), as well as for the development of particular social institutions

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(with regard to law, religion, government cf. Huizinga, 1950) and forms of cultural identity (Geertz, 1973). Within these extensive streams of research, we believe that there are at least two arguments in particular that can directly contribute to the development a theoretical frame within which to consider the practical challenge of how people in organizations might engage in scenario planning activities that purposefully involve an enactment of the environment.

First, we are drawn to the conceptualization of *play* as the primary process through which meaning is created as such (Winnicott, 1971). On this analysis, the infant first attaches meaning to a 'transitional object' that marks an ambiguous area of experience within which the self is not fully differentiated from the environment. This so-called transitional object involves however not merely a material object as such (e.g., a source of food), but a rather additionally it refers to the process of object relations through which the differentiation of inside and outside, self and other is actually in the process of being accomplished. In turn, this primary experience gives rise to a series of increasingly complex object relations that are retained throughout life "in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work" (1971, p. 14). In this light, play refers precisely to those processes in which people handle an ambiguous lack of differentiation between that which is imagined and that which is perceived. And the importance of such transitional processes (for psychoanalysis, as well as perhaps for that particular kind of 'imaginative living' called scenario planning) is that they involve the creation and discovery of meaning as such.

Thus while the organizational theory of enactment and the psychoanalytic theory of play have been developed in response to practical issues at different levels of scale, we find that they complement each other in

ways that merit consideration with respect to scenario planning. On one hand, based on an ontology of social constructionism, enactment theory suggests that organizations enact their environments, and furthermore, that the 'organization' is itself enacted through the social interactions of its members. And on the other hand, based on an analysis of primary human epistemological and affective states, psychoanalytic theory suggests that the organization and its environment may be considered 'transitional' phenomena that exist in a potential space between inner experience and outer 'reality'. Synthesizing the two streams of theory, we can claim that as members of an organization interact in such a way as to enact the environment, those interactions that involve the creation and discovery of meaning with respect to the environment may be most aptly described in terms of play.

With regard to the potential of play activities to enable creative enactment of the organizational environment in the context of scenario planning, we are drawn to an argument from the field of educational psychology that frames the outcomes of the ambiguous experience of play in terms of human adaptive potential (Sutton-Smith, 1997). On this analysis, it is acknowledged at the outset that different rhetorics are employed whenever play is put forward as a object of study or as a possibility for action (e.g., the rhetorics of fate, power, identity and imagination). And yet on the other hand, it is noted that within each of the various rhetorics of play, a degree of ambiguity arises both with respect to the purported function and outcome of the activity in principle, as well as with respect to the manifest experience of the activity in practice. And thus while the very act of naming these various dimensions of ambiguity as such might well contribute to "more useful general scientific theorizing" (1997, p. 217) about

play, at the same time the ambiguity of play might be what is most essential about it.

Indeed, it is precisely the variability of the play phenomena, the extent to which play remains resolutely ambiguous in theory and in practice, which recommends it most for our consideration with respect to scenario planning. In view of contemporary theories of biological adaptation, it appears that because play "contains so much nonsense, so much replication, and is so flexible…it is a prime domain for the actualisation of whatever the brain contains. And for that matter, speaking in behavioural rather than neurological terms, (it)] is typically a primary place for the expression of anything that is humanly imaginable" (1997, p. 226). Phrased descriptively with respect to different forms of human action, play thus appears as an "exemplar of cultural variability" that provides an arena within which new alternatives may legitimately be explored (1997, p. 230). And with respect to the outcomes that might follow from the pursuit of such alternatives, we direct our attention toward the adaptive potential of play, or rather, toward the extent to which the knowledge and skills that are developed through play experiences may enable adaptation.

Thus whereas psychoanalytic theory suggests that play can be understood as the activity of creation and discovery in the ambiguous area of transitional experience, educational psychological theory suggests that this play activity may be understood to enhance and extend our capacity, both at the individual and the social level, to express and actualize that which we imagine, a capacity that may in turn have profound implications for survival, adaptation, and growth.

We find that these two lines of thought are coherent with the notion of scenario planning as an activity through which the environment is enacted.

Furthermore, we suggest that they provide compelling reasons why scenario planning might be fruitfully reconsidered in view of play theory. For the purposes of developing theory that may guide additional research in this area, we can synthesize the arguments we have considered into two basic, provisional claims. First, if the situation that confronts scenario planners is framed not in terms of uncertainty that can be remedied by additional information, but rather in terms of ambiguity that must be handled through processes that encourage multivocality, then play appears both as a plausible description of what scenario planners might already be doing, and additionally as a normative hypothesis about what scenario planners should optimally be doing. And second, if the environment to which the organization must respond is framed not as an external set of objectively real conditions, but rather as an intersubjective, transitional reality that is socially constructed by the organizational participants, then play appears as that form of activity which holds the greatest promise to sustain and promote new forms of creation and discovery within the organization.

Organizational theory has, in related streams of research, touched on issues similar to those we have identified here. For example, in an effort to highlight the limitations of traditional decision theory, March (1979) has somewhat famously embraced play as "the deliberate, temporary relaxation of rules in order to explore the possibilities of alternative rules" (1979, p. 77). We are compelled and encouraged by this affirmation as well as by subsequent investigations of the 'serious' organizational impacts of play with regard to identity and career choice (Ibarra, 2003), behavior motivation (Glynn, 1994), creativity (Amabile, 1996) product development (Schrage, 2000). At the same

time, we believe that the theories of play we have addressed here have not yet been fully integrated into organizational theory.

Toward this end, we find that Roos & Victor's (1999) suggestion about strategy making may guide attempts to bring the adaptive potential of play to bear most directly on scenario planning. Specifically, we believe that concept of 'serious play' may provide scenario planning with new content as well as a new process. Indeed, if scenario planners were encouraged to 'play seriously'—a concept that we can, paraphrasing Winnicott and Sutton-Smith, define provisionally in the context of organizations as a play activity in which people purposefully create and discover meaning as they express and actualize that which is humanly imaginable for the organization—our theory indicates that they would in practice be 'enacting their environment'. Thus the content of scenario planning would not refer to a world that is postulated as ontologically real, yet uncertain, but instead to a world that is constructed and postulated as such in and through the dialogues and interactions of the participants.

In this regard, and by way of closing our theoretical considerations here, we recall Bourdieu's citation of Plato's interest in serious play (*spoudaios paizein*) (Bourdieu, 1998). In Platonic philosophy, the term 'serious play' refers to the purpose and structure of the dialogue itself, where the 'seriousness' derives from the truth of the matter under consideration, and the 'play' involves the movement of the dialectical method of questioning, thus serving as "the foundation of the education of the free human being" (Freydberg, 1997). Bourdieu, in turn, reminds us that the capacity to play seriously is itself inseperable from the situation of those individuals who would engage in it. In this light, we address our attention in the following section of this paper to an illustrative case of scenario planning, framed for the purposes of illustration as

"a socially instituted situation in which one can defy or ignore the common alternative between playing…and being serious…by playing seriously and taking ludic things seriously, busying oneself with problems that serious, and truly busy, people ignore" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 128).

An Illustrative Case: The TelCo Strategy Team

While Stake (2000) has noted that the subjective character of case studies can enhance our propositional and experiential knowledge, Merriam (1998) suggests that an illustrative case study's heuristic potential holds promise to enhance our understanding of a phenomenon by exploring and exemplifying new or different meaning. Therefore, in order to provide an illustration for scenario development as enactment, we investigated a play-based strategic change intervention in the strategy team of a large European telecommunications provider[1]. Participant observation as well as semi-structured interviews with participants conducted before and after the actual intervention have provided us with a data set suitable to reflect on our theoretical proposition.

Started up in 1995, TelCo was a small wireless company in a European national market. In contrast to its competitors, it seemed to have recognized the broad consumer potential of wireless technology and had soon thereafter differentiated itself in the marketplace on the basis of a strong brand which emphasized a young, active lifestyle. This strategic position enabled the company to record significant growth through the late 1990's. By early 2000 it was acquired by a state-owned competitor who hoped that the TelCo brand spirit would cross-fertilize its own cellphone as well as fixed phone businesses.

TelCo's corporate strategy team had played a significant role in the development and propagation of the brand values that had driven the company's growth. The market downturn in conjunction with the post-merger integration with the acquiring company resulted in people from the team voicing discomfort and confusion and what actually needed to be done. As one member of the strategy team argued "These days there's huge confusion about the brand, the company, the essence, the vision, etc. It's all become so complicated, and I really feel we need just one way to say it all." Engaging in more traditional forms of strategic management such as market analyses, risk evaluations, financial projections etc. did not lead to a strategy that was satisfactory to the turbulence and changes within and around the organization. The strategic confusion was explicated by a senior team member when she stated: "Now, as strategists, what can we do?"

As a consequence, the team decided to explore alternative routes for strategy-making and scenario development. In February 2001 the team got involved in a two-day change intervention that was designed to explore from the team's perspective TelCo's identity, its environment and its strategic challenges in a different way, namely a process of serious play.

The workshop sketched out and analyzed here in the light of our theoretical considerations used a play-based technique[2]. The explicit purpose of this process was to uncover and create new insights by using LEGO materials as a language to think, speak, visualize, communicate, and understand business and managerial challenges. During the two-day retreat this technique was used to encourage participants literally and figuratively to construct and de-construct their view of the organization and its business landscape. This objective was achieved through a process that involved several distinct stages.

First, participants were asked to build their invidiual view on TelCo employing the LEGO bricks provided. Once they explained their individual models to the rest of the team, participants were then invited to integrate their individual models into a shared model of TelCo. Then, participants were asked to build the landscape of TelCo and its key stakeholders. In a fourth step, participants constructed the different qualities of relationships and conncections between TelCo and its landscape and integrated them into the model. Finally, participants were asked to imagine different emergent events and then 'play them out' in their impact on TelCo and/or its landscape. From the variety of events 'played out' through this immensely vivid and rich process, one incident seems most relevant to our investigation.

The three-dimensional shared model constructed by the TelCo strategists spanned over two meters across a boardroom table, and additional elements were placed on shelves along the wall of the room. The group had identified the overall metaphor of 'a flotilla of ships' to describe the array of different business units now scattered not just through the UK, but around the world. Up at the head of the flotilla, the group had placed a construction of the TelCo brand values, in such a way as to demonstrate their importance as a guiding force for the company.

One particular team member had been with the company from the beginning, and he had been one of the strongest supporters of the TelCo values all along. Near the end of the time allotted for the workshop, he was standing back from the table, surveying the constructions built by the team. He then moved forward, grabbed the brand values, broke the connections between that model and the other models, picked it up from the head of the flotilla, walked back to the other end of the table and put it down behind all the other 'ships'.

He announced to the group that he thought that in fact the TelCo values did not currently provide the team or the company with any strategic, guiding light. Instead, he claimed that the values were more accurately dragging the company down, that they were a thing of the past that needed to be recognized as such, and that if they were to play a role in the future of the company, they needed to be refreshed significantly in light of the company's new situation.

The team engaged in a lively debate whether this rearrangement of the brand would appropriate. It was acknowledged that the brand in and of itself was a strong cultural feature, but in the post-merger situation, its relative value and position had to be reviewed – adequately expressed by this change in the relative position of the brand in the model.

Following this intervention, the participants reported three significant outcomes. First, they reported that experienced an increased level of coherence with respect to the language that they used to describe the content of their strategy in the course of their daily interactions. Second, they reported that this increased coherence allowed them to reconsider their activities as a strategy team. Finally, this reconsideration resulted in a decision to cancel an upcoming executive training program for which they had budgeted €600,000 because it had been designed around the traditional brand values that no longer held sway.

Discussion

We find that this case study illustrates processes of *enactment* example as follows. Having collectively constructed the organization's identity and its landscape, participants were asked to imagine and play out emerging events and their impact on landscape and identity. The post-merger challenges to

integrate old and new business units resulted in placing a model of a flotilla of ships on the table. Enacting the organization as a group of ships in difficult waters guided by the flag of brand values led, according to participants, to a much clearer view of the relevance of the brand. However, when the brand was physically removed from the front of the sculpture to the end, it was considered even more informing. Rather than the idealist view of a guiding brand, it was collectively acknowledged that the brand and its strength needed significant renewal in order to sustain its performance after the acquisition. The linguistically and symbolically mediated process that this team engaged in resulted in enacting the organization's identity and provided a more subtle and shared understanding of the changing role of the brand values' in the new post-merger era. One participant expressed her relief that "others in the business had a common understanding of the problem".

With respect to the proposed relevance of metaphor for enactment process, we note that the two dominating metaphors employed by participants in this case example to enact their organization's identity were that of a "flotilla of ships" and a "flag of the brand". Whereas the former was designed to represent integrated yet dependent entities by means of different boats that were well connected and oriented in the same direction, the latter provided the overall orientation of the construction process. To view the organization by means of these two metaphors has presented most participants with a different way of conceiving of the organization, its current situation and its brand. But even more so did the changed position of the flag. The change of its relative position came with a change of meaning: rather than conceiving of it as the guiding light towards which the flotilla orients, it has turned into an aspect that literally lay behind the flotilla and threatened to drag the company down. As one

participant recalled: "Our holy grail (i.e. the brand) was actually a holy anchor that held us back from moving forward." This transformative power of the flotilla and flag metaphor correspond to Tsoukas (1991) observation that the role of a metaphor goes beyond mere description but constituting a specific perspective on social reality.

When literally constructing the organization and its environment in a three-dimensional arrangement that spread over the entire conference table, the relatedness of concepts and player on this landscape could physically be presented. Relative size of ships, relative distance, overall size of the construction, relation position of the brand are all extra-verbal devices that extended the expressive repertoire of that management team. One participant emphasize the visual-tactile dimension of the process in saying "I now have clear picture of us and our landscape. We should use photos of our constructions when communicating with others on this." Others expressed some discomfort with this new expressive device: "Even though I am a highly visual person, I had difficulties initially to use the bricks." The richness of the images and metaphors employed helped the team to explicate tacit knowledge in terms of size and spatial relatedness. By enacting 'the organization' and 'its environment' through linguistically and symbolically mediated processes, individual as well as collective viewpoints could be externalized in a physical and plastic way. In Weick's (1990) terms, the construction on the conference table helped this team to classify and assign certain objects to classes: stakeholders, competitors, business units, head quarters, brand values, customers were all discursively enacted and physically present on the table.

The TelCo case also appears to illustrate several aspects of *serious play* as we have defined it here. First and foremost, the participants were

experiencing ambiguity of various kinds. At a macro-level, there were competing and contradictory understandings of the relationship between TelCo and the parent company as the post-merger situation unfolded. At a micro-level, to the extent that they were struggling to develop a strategy that could accommodate the macro-level turbulence, the team was struggling to define its own role in the company. Thus in the psychoanalytic terms we elaborated above, the TelCo strategy team was 'playing' in a transitional area of experience in which the inside and the outside remained ambiguously undifferentiated. Was the external environment to blame for the lack of a coherent strategy at TelCo? Was the parent company part of the external environment? Was the team itself to blame for the lack of a coherent strategy? How could the team build on its own experience in the past and create a meaningful strategy for the future? The team struggled to find answers to these questions – and thus as they turned purposefully to a play activity that allowed them to create and discover meaning by expressing and actualising that which was imaginable for the organization, we can say that they were 'playing seriously'.

Furthermore, with respect to the specific episode involving the flotilla of ships and the representation of the corporate brand, the TelCo strategy team appeared to have actualised their 'adaptive potential' to some extent. Drawing directly from the team's own reflections on the process, we can affirm that the TelCo corporate brand, which had historically served as the organization's inspiration to adapt in such a way as to meet customer's needs, had in the context of post-merger integration begun to inhibit the organization's capacity to change and grow. Thus when one of the team members recognized this limitation, and dramatically moved the 'flag' representation of the brand to the

back of the flotilla, he took a first step on behalf of the team and the larger organization toward the adaptive transformation that was called for under the circumstances.

Reflecting on this finding, we recognize that it is notoriously difficult to assess the causal dynamics that may pertain to the relationship between micro-level events and macro-level success for the firm. Moreover, continued tumult within the telecommunications sector makes it difficult if not impossible to assess whether TelCo's strategy has subsequently enabled *effective* adaptation or not. And we suggest that the decision made by the team to cancel the executive training program represents a cost savings of sufficient significance to provide evidence of how serious play can enhance adaptive potential in organizations. In summary, we suggest that the case illustrates how serious play processes can involve an enactment of the environment, through which meaning is purposefully created and discovered as that which is imaginable for the organization is expressed and actualised.

Finally, with respect to the existing theory and practice of *scenario planning*, we believe the case illustrates the potential that inheres in the conceptual shift from uncertainty to ambiguity. By playing out different alleys of emergence, ambiguity was rendered visible through the model. When one participant strongly disagreed that in his view, the brand currently does not provide a guiding light to the flotilla but rather drags the organization down, and he subsequently changed the relative position of the brand, others could physically observe and experience this change of view. Also, the opportunity to take a look at the organization from a clients or competitors point of view, sheds light on privately held assumptions and taken for granted mental models. According to participants, the shared learning experience provided them with a

meta-mental model of the organization as a flotilla and the role of the brand that people drew on even months after the workshop. As one participants recalls in an interview: "I have had a meeting with Darren since and we share a beautiful common language since we did the play stuff." The claim of a common language in our view is an indication of a shared mental model (e.g. Schein, 1999).

In terms of our proposition to conceive of scenario planning as enactment through serious play, the case example indicates that the TelCo team was struggling less with uncertainty about the future of the external environment than with different, contradictory viewpoints about the organization in the present. Overall, participants attributed great significance to this play-based process of enactment. As one participant put it: "We looked externally with a fresh eye."

Implications and Conclusion

A subtle shift in perspective has led us to reconsider scenario planning activities as processes of enactment through serious play. We believe that this shift strengthens and substantiates scenario planning's claim on the relevance of scenarios as structured narratives. We contend that the TelCo case illustrates how the overall issue at hand may not so much be *uncertainty about the future,* but rather *ambiguity* due to contradictory interpretations *today*. In the case illustration, when participants employed three-dimensional metaphors in a playful process, they became aware and of this ambiguity, and began to appreciate the different, equally plausible perspectives in terms of their organization and its strategic challenges. Indeed, these metaphors appeared to make "the issue at hand more transitory and plastic" (Huff & Jenkins, 2002, p.

8), providing participants with the opportunity to express their own views in a physical, spatial and tactile way. Paraphrasing Tsoukas (1991), this process helped participants to constitute their reality and provided a frame of how it ought to be viewed. Similarly, following Schoemaker (1997), these metaphor-rich approaches appeared to be more evocative and capable of challenging people's prevailing mental models (1997, p. 47). These findings echo Smircich & Stubbart's (1985) observation that a variation of metaphors holds promise of a competitive advantage, though we would propose that it is rather *playful* variation of metaphors that enables processes of enactment.

This paper is any early attempt to introduce the concept of serious play in the context of scenario planning. Among the potential routes for further research, we see the need to explore and further substantiate the concept of serious play in organizations. In relation to processes of enactment, we identify a need to understand better how serious play could contribute conceptually as well as practically to the growing stream of research concerned with foresight (e.g. Tsoukas & Shepherd, 2004). In broader terms, we suspect that a closer examination of how serious play contributes and facilitates processes of analogical reasoning in organizations might enhance our understanding of organizational dynamics in general (e.g. Marshak, 1993; Marshak, Keenoy, Oswick, & Grant, 2000; Oswick et al., 2002; Tsoukas, 1991, 1993).

Notes

1. We refer to this organization as 'TelCo' in deference to confidentiality agreements.

2. The LEGO Serious Play technique is a structured learning process grounded in theories of play, imagination and complexity. See www.seriousplay.com for additional information.

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Tables

Challenge of scenario planning	Uncertainty
Trigger for challenge	Contingencies in key variables of the external environment
Suggested coping strategy	Collective imagination and exploration of scenarios as different routes for the future
Nature of scenarios	Structured, script-like narratives
Intended outcome	Anticipation of tomorrow

Table 1: Scenario planning – Key concepts

Challenge of scenario planning	Uncertainty	Ambiguity
Trigger for challenge	Contingencies in key variables of the external environment	Equiplausibility of interpretations
Suggested coping strategy	Exploration of scenarios as different routes for the future	Use and variation of metaphors
Nature of scenarios	Structured script-like narratives	Ditto; deliberately involving metaphors
Intended outcome	Anticipation of tomorrow	Preparedness today

Table 2: Scenario planning – Shift in perspective