Guest editorial

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Work and play: new twists on an old relationship

Introduction

Since Huizinga’s (1955) seminal Homo Ludens, we have been aware of the centrality of play to our humanity and of its various manifestations in everyday life, including work. Play was responsible for some of the largest and most complex organizational events of antiquity, such as the structured contest of the Greek Olympic games and the bloody Roman circus shows for the masses. Since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, however, work has been split apart from play in an ever-increasing march of efficiency and rationalization (Russell, 2001; Zuboff, 1988).

In recent decades, a number of strands have come together to break the dichotomy between work and non-work and to reconceptualise the role of play in both. The flexing of workplace boundaries (Ashkenas et al., 2002), has created virtual offices, virtual teams and even virtual organizations. The rise of protean (Hall, 1996) and boundaryless (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) careers, in conjunction with the demand for maximizing flexibility, have affected the traditional divide between work and extra-work domains. The work-family balance debate has forced a re-examination of time and space at home and at work. The growing tendency of organizations to incorporate leisure elements in their workspace (such as cafeterias and gyms) and the emergence of the “home office” are rapidly becoming integral parts of the post-industrial habitat. The ever-expanding consumer society (in which having fun is a divine right) and the search for authentic experiences have triggered a re-examination of the relationship between work and play as a critical aspect of contemporary working lives (in line with the American colloquial “we work hard and we play hard”).

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The role of play in organizational life is becoming increasingly important as well. Companies like Google, Gore, Motorola, and Du Pont encourage their employees to use up to 20 percent of their work time to play freely with new ideas. Social scientists have underlined the importance of play in calibrating individual (Sutton-Smith, 1997) and collective adaptive variability (March, 1976; Weick, 1979); in learning and development (Bruner, 1972; Kolb, 1984); in peak performance and optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Mainemelis, 2001); in psychological adjustment to the realities of the workplace (Roy, 1959); in personal (Russi, 1993) and social (Locke, 1996) emotional experience; and in organizational creativity (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006). Play as an element of mindfulness is only starting to make inroads into management practice, with the emergence of “positive organizational scholarship” (Cameron et al., 2005). On the other hand, social scientists have also noted the use of play as a subversion to organized work (Roy, 1959; Fremontti, 1971), and indeed its anti-structural essence (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Turner, 1974), as well as its seductive qualities that are so fundamental to our consumer culture (Altman, 1998).

Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) recently observed that play is among the most complex and least understood behavioral phenomena in organizations. With this special issue, we wish to help address this knowledge gap by providing the scope and space to organizational scholars to comment and enlighten us on this rapidly resurfacing aspect of working lives – play in its various forms, manifestations, and roles in daily life. The stated purpose of the special issue was to help define the field of play as a scholarly enterprise as well as a managerial concern. In response to our call for papers, we received over a dozen of submissions. The four papers that were finally selected to appear in the special issue contribute different approaches, conceptualizations, and thematic angles to the study of play. Most importantly, all four contribute novel and interesting conceptual twists on a very old and perennially transforming relationship – play and work.

**Play and identity**

In the first article, entitled “Identity work and play,” Herminia Ibarra and Jennifer L. Petriglieri explore the relationship between play and the enactment of novel but not yet fully elaborated identities. They observe that while in the past research has examined how individuals create coherence and continuity across various central, actual, and present identities, less is known to date about how individuals create and explore potential identities. Ibarra and Petriglieri go well beyond the mere observation that identity formation and transformation is a variegated process: their analysis articulates specific conditions under which identity exploration is or is not playful. They introduce the concept of “identity play” to describe an identity process that generates variety, rather than consistency, and is aimed at creating future possibilities, rather than at maintaining or repairing existing identities and integrating them with external role demands. They carefully contrast-and-compare identity work and identity play and suggest that the two differ in terms of purpose (behavioral goals and locus of evaluation); place (activity boundaries and identity tense); and process (type of exploration and type of commitment). Ibarra and Petriglieri analyze some key aspects of the process of identity play as it relates to role transitions, and they discuss implications for organizational research on identity and career evolution.
Play and learning
The second article, entitled “Learning to play, playing to learn: a case study of a ludic learning space,” presents a case study on the creation of a ludic learning space in a pick-up softball league. Drawing on a rich intellectual tradition that has long associated play with learning, Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb place under the microscope both the elements of play that contribute to the emergence of a ludic space and the process by which a ludic space contributes to learning and development. Their analysis draws on experiential learning theory, focuses on social play, and underscores the dialectical nature of both play and learning. Kolb and Kolb argue that three cardinal elements of a ludic space – self-directed engagement, a dual focus on process and outcome, and novelty – are also the key principles of a social space that is highly conducive to deep learning. They conclude that deep learning can be nurtured within formal organizational settings insofar as the work context allows participants to express themselves in authentic ways, self-organize, and create boundaries for recursive, timeless play.

Play and enterprise
In the third article, entitled “An exploration of entrepreneurship and play,” Sandra King Kauanui, Kevin D. Thomas, Cynthia L. Sherman, Gail Ross Waters, and Michaela Gilea examine the way entrepreneurs enact their enterprises and their vision of their role in the enterprise. For those who consider their business within a wider life context that includes a spiritual path, the environment they create emphasises flow and play as integral to work. The quest for purpose in life by means of their enterprise turns these individuals’ work into a calling and a reward in and for itself (rather than a means to an end), associated with a strong sense of joy and pleasure and expressed playfulness (fun), and a lesser ego-centric emphasis in their way of managing objectives and resources. Importantly, they do not consider work and play as distinct entities.

Play and change
In the final article, entitled “The play of change,” Lloyd Sandelands examines, the relationship between play and social change. Huizinga (1955) argued that although play can take solitary forms, it is only social play that is capable of creating and transforming culture. Here, Sandelands takes this argument a provocative step forward: he argues that although it can be experienced and enacted by individuals alone, play is not about individual persons but about the whole of the human community. In the first part of his article, he explores five puzzling elements of play: attraction, synchrony, merger, selflessness, and unserious seriousness. He then examines how these puzzling elements of play conjure a transpersonal social whole and a dynamic of creating new social forms and new social arrangements. In the third part of his article, he suggests that play is the key to managing change in organizations. More accurately, he argues that organizational change is best “played” and not “managed.” Sandelands’s concluding argument seems timely in these times of uncertainty, economic crisis, and social unrest:

If change in organizations is truly to be played even and especially when the stakes are high it must be conducted in the light of a love greater than the organization itself.
Differences and similarities
The four articles in the special issue explore play at different levels of analysis: individual (Ibarra and Petriglieri and King Kauanui et al.), group (Kolb and Kolb), and larger social (Sandelands). Two articles are conceptual (Ibarra and Petriglieri and Sandelands) and two empirical (Kauanui et al. and Kolb and Kolb). Two articles focus on the perceived differences between play and work (Ibarra and Petriglieri and Kauanui et al.); one focuses on the characteristics of undiluted, “free” play (Kolb and Kolb); and one puts forward the idea that play is a fundamental element in the creation and evolution of human community (Sandelands). The four articles draw on and contribute to diverse streams of organizational research: identity and careers (Ibarra and Petriglieri); learning and development (Kolb and Kolb); entrepreneurship and spirituality (King Kauanui et al.); and organizational change (Sandelands).

Notwithstanding these and other differences, we invite you to discover three key points that run through all four articles: the importance of time and space in play; the dynamic personal and social benefits associated with the transitional, between-and-betwixt reality of play; and the need for creating social contexts in which play and work flourish symbiotically.

We hope that you will enjoy reading the four articles in the special issue. We also hope that the “new twists” that these articles contribute will help develop play as a scholarly enterprise in organizational science.

Charalampos Mainemelis and Yochanan Altman
Guest Editors

References


**Editorial post scriptum**

When the guest editors had presented me with their choice of four papers for the special issue on “work and play,” I had realized that while they were working on the issue, another paper had ripened for acceptance — and that it would fit the Haralampous/Yochanan (i.e. Mainemelis/Altmann) issue. Hence I had decided to attach my “post scriptum” to their editorial and to attach the fifth paper to their selection (after having checked it over with the latter of the above-mentioned editorial “guest workers”). The abovementioned editors come to the conclusion that they and the authors of their four papers make three key points, which are traceable in their work. Namely:

[...] the importance of time and space in play, the dynamic personal and social benefits associated with the transitional, between and betwixt reality of play, and the need for creating social contexts in which play and work flourish symbiotically.

It so happens that all three key points can be discovered in the fifth paper, the one by Carolyn Hunter from Loughborough University in the UK, Dariusz Jemielniak from the Koszinski University in Poland (a private business school) and Agnieszka Postula from the Warsaw University, also in Poland (the public educational institution — so much for diversity of the team). Their paper, entitled “Temporal and spatial shifts within playful work” announces the first key point in the very title. They have interviewed software engineers and game programmers, software development project managers and entrepreneurs running their own software developing companies. They have concluded that playful work increases sociability and creativity and revealed:

[...] playful performance as constituent for knowledge work [which] may contribute towards a better understanding of the role played by fun and playful behavior in creative problem-solving and inventing.

But there is more to their paper — a delicate scent of a new — potentially fertile trail to be blazed by future researchers in culturally loaded projects. They notice, towards the end of their paper, that occupational identity of managers had often been interpreted through the works of literature. More specifically, they mention *American Psycho* (as analyzed by Hjorth and
Steyaert in "American Psycho/European Schizo: stories of managerial elites" from Gagliardi's and Czarniawska's volume "Management Education and Humanities") with respect to managers. Software developers and programmers, according to them, can see their reflection much more distinctly in movies — their mirror images walk around in Matrix, or Johnny Mnemonic or, generally speaking, in the cyberpunk genre. I agree that one can smell a digital rat here, though I think Gibson's Pattern Recognition is a powerful and twisted rendition of marketing wizards and political PR spin doctors rather than mad geniuses programming games, robots and telecommunications. Nevertheless, if I could, some day, have a special issue on the images of management, organization, change and other serious academic issues in, say, Against the Day by Thomas Pynchon, I would celebrate the entry of the humanist spirit to the resuscitated body of managerial sciences. Meanwhile, let us talk of software engineers, for they design our digital multi-mediated pleasures.

Slawek Magala
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