

Towards a Playful Organization Ideal-type: Values of a Playful Organizational Culture

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ABSTRACT

Numerous organizations have embarked on playful endeavors such as serious gaming (playing games with a learning/training purpose) and ‘gamification’ (applying game technology and principles to make existing practices more game-like). One could consequently theorize about the dawn of playful organizations, i.e. a type of organization that is culturally and structurally playful. This article offers a first step towards a playful organization theory. It specifically offers a conceptual framework of a playful organizational culture. Following a review of play theory as well as organization and management theory that was inspired by play, the author describes a playful organizational culture as encompassing contingency, opportunism, equivalence, instructiveness, meritocracy and conviviality as values. The framework offers leaders, managers and game/play designers opportunities to further develop playful endeavors for organizations. It also offers social scientists opportunities to further research the emergence and issues of playful organizations.

Keywords

playfulness, organization, organizational culture, conceptual framework, play theory

INTRODUCTION

Organizations worldwide have embarked on playful endeavors. Some have described the use of games within organizations for a learning or training purpose (e.g. Michael and Chen 2005; Prensky 2001; Schrage 2000). One example is the game *Cold Stone Creamery: Stone City* (Persuasive Games, 2007) which Bogost designed to help employees learn to avoid waste when serving customers ice-cream (2007). The attractiveness of games has led others to also consider how games’ common design principles can be applied to existing organizational processes to render them playful or ‘gamified’ (Edery and Mollick 2008; McGonigal 2011; Reeves and Read 2009). One example of an organization’s ‘gamification’ is *Foldit* (University of Washington, 2008). This game changed the University of Washington’s existing process of predicting complex protein structures, rendering it attractive to a global community of players (Cooper et al 2010). As moments or forms of playfulness, serious games and ‘gamification’ have recently gained popularity within numerous organizations.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference: Think Design Play.

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These recent playful endeavors can be explained by considering longer ongoing discussions about how organizations and society in general have been changing. Traditionally organization connotes social structure, i.e. the instigation of ‘institutions’ in the form of rules, norms or values (Scott 2008). Arguably, the most extreme type of organization is then the bureaucracy, where institutions are so apparent and rigid that employees can be viewed as simply parts of the machine that is the organization (Morgan 1997; Weber 1946/1947). Some have argued that bureaucratic organizations are hardly useful in an age where many organizations produce innovative services and knowledge instead of tangible goods, i.e. ‘professional organizations’ (Brock 2006; Von Nordenflycht 2010) such as consultancy and creative industry businesses. Moreover, viewing people as parts of a machine has long been the subject of philosophical criticism (see e.g. McGregor 1960; Pink 2009, 21). A ‘play ethic’ that stresses ‘adaptive, imaginative and passionate’ action (Kane 2003, 62) might be much more valuable than its older counterpart, i.e. a Protestant work ethic that stresses a conservative or even inactive attitude (Kane 2003, 72-73; Weber 1930/1958). Overall, in an ‘information age’ (Castells 1996), ‘knowledge economy’ (Drucker 1969) or ‘post-industrial society’ (Bell 1973) a bureaucratic organization can seem counterintuitive at best. Although for many organizations a bureaucracy has long been inapplicable (see e.g. Mintzberg 1979, 1983), a bureaucratic or at least hierarchical foundation arguably still underlies the term ‘organization’. This has led many contemporary organization scholars to keep arguing for different forms of decentralization or flexibility, i.e. distributing strategic decision-making power throughout an organization or a more general openness towards disrupting institutions when needed (Kane 2003, 259-260; Malone 2004, 5, 193-194). In a society where scholars continuously feel the need to challenge more traditional forms and connotations of organization, the aforementioned experiments with play and playfulness make good sense.

One could consequently theorize about the dawn of *playful organizations*. Given the above descriptions and explanations of numerous playful endeavors, one could theorize about the dawn of a type of organization that is playful in and of itself. Such a playful organization could be defined using internal and external perspectives, both inextricably bound together. From an internal perspective a playful organization would have completely institutionalized play, thus rendering both its culture and structure inherently playful. As a result of institutionalizing play, from an external perspective the organization would seem very creative, spontaneous and pleasurable.

To argue that playful organizations could or should be emerging, the question of how one could observe or instigate them becomes important. This article attempts to offer a first answer to that question. I offer a conceptual framework of what a playful organization would entail culturally. This is a first step towards a playful organization ‘ideal-type’ (Weber 1949), i.e. a utopian theory of an organization most playful, both structurally and culturally. Such an ideal-type can fuel empirical research and practical applications.

By offering a conceptual framework of a playful organizational *culture*, this article lays the foundation for a playful organization ideal-type. As numerous organization theorists have argued, organizational culture can be seen as a set of conventions, norms and values that people within an organization seem to uphold and subsequently determines the organization’s structure (Alvesson 2002; Cameron and Quinn 2006). As such it is a good starting point for the proposed ideal-type.

I developed the framework after reviewing numerous publications from two disciplines. Firstly, I reviewed publications of play theory, an established discipline that has developed extensively over the past decades. Secondly, I reviewed publications of contemporary organization and management theory that originated from play theory or common notions of play. The latter is a much newer and emerging discipline to which this article aims to contribute.

The framework consists of six complementary values. To better argue for these values, I first discuss five concepts of play in the next section. I discuss the values themselves in the subsequent section. I conclude the article with a discussion about the opportunities this framework offers for organization leaders, game/play designers and researchers. I also discuss several methodical and substantive issues.

CONCEPTS OF PLAY

Before presenting the six playful values, an understanding of play itself is offered in this section. I deem a theory of play essentially a theory of people involved in an experience they would be inclined to term 'play'. An organization's employees are also involved in an experience, i.e. the collective pursuit of the organization's rationale. Thus, if that organization is playful its employees should arguably be able to reflect on their work experience as resembling or simply being play. Hence an in-depth look at play theory is relevant for the purpose of developing a playful organizational culture theory.

In this section I discuss five concepts of play: alternate reality, freedom of action, equivalence, engagement and external inconsequence. These concepts were developed after reviewing mostly general play theory and only marginally to games-specific play theory. I consider games-specific theory a subset of general play theory, as games can be seen as artifacts that instantiate specific forms of play (see also Juul 2005). In other words play takes place in a game, but does not require a game to take place. As to the selection of publications, I have included a set of both older and newer publications (Björk and Holopainen 2005; Caillois 1958/1961; Consalvo 2009; De Koven 1978; Huizinga 1938/1950; Malaby 2007; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Sutton-Smith 1997). The selected works are relevant as they are comprehensive and mostly build upon previous work. Having reviewed these publications, I developed the aforementioned five concepts as applicable to play experiences in any setting, i.e. on a playground, table, computer, or indeed at work.

Alternate reality

Many have argued that when playing we step into a 'magic circle' (Huizinga 1938/1950, 35-37), 'imaginary universe' (Caillois 1958/1961, 19) or simply a 'frame' (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 94). Either way, we indeed seem to step into a context delimited by space and time (Caillois 1958/1961, 22; Huizinga 1938/1950, 37). Some see this context as 'separate' (Caillois 1958/1961, 10) and often 'fanciful and visionary' (Sutton-Smith 1997, 127), having a 'boundary' (Björk and Holopainen 2005, 8; De Koven 1978, 37-38; Huizinga 1938/1950, 37) and governing the behavior that players can exhibit within it (Caillois 1958/1961, 7; Huizinga 1938/1950, 38).

Overall we seem to create and engage with some kind of *alternate reality* when we play. This alternate reality can be well-defined, e.g. in the case of a computer game through a graphically rendered environment. Yet an alternate reality does not have to be detailed and well-defined at all. It can be created by only adopting a simple set of rules, i.e. some affordances and limitations that state which behavior is or is not allowed. As long as the

players can understand such affordances and limitations they are able to appreciate them as creating an alternate reality in which they can play.

I use the term 'alternate' reality, because to the players the context of play is in itself a reality. At the same time this 'new' reality is positioned within the reality of our daily lives. Huizinga and Caillois chose to define the context of play as not serious, unreal or nonsensical to argue that it strongly contrasts the reality of daily life, even though they also recognized that play can be very serious in itself (Caillois 1958/1961, 10; Huizinga 1938/1950, 33). Like some play theorists (Consalvo 2009; Malaby 2007; Sutton-Smith 1997, 208) I find this definition too stringent and problematic, which is why I resort to terming the play reality simply an alternate one. This way one can better appreciate relations between play and not-play realities, and one can avoid adjectives like 'non-serious' or 'unreal' that only confuse the understanding of what it means to play.

The main consequence of an alternate reality is that players have a sense of uncertainty and suspense, or at least interest and intrigue (Caillois 1958/1961, 7, 9; Huizinga 1938/1950, 38; Malaby 2007). Players are confronted with a reality of which they know little or nothing, yet step into nonetheless. As such an alternate reality is an important basic element of play.

Freedom of action

Many have argued that once we have accepted an alternate reality we need to be confronted with a sense of freedom before we can really play (Caillois 1958/1961, 8-9; Huizinga 1938/1950, 35; Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 304). Although the alternate reality creates certain and often very clear boundaries (Sutton-Smith 1997, 182-183), it also explicitly needs to leave room for choice. Specifically, it needs to allow players to exhibit at least a couple forms of behavior for them to feel free and creative (Sutton-Smith 1997, 127, 175). Thus the player has to have, to some extent, *freedom of action*.

Affording players some freedom is important for them to consider the context in which they find themselves as play. Without it the player would be more likely to feel like he/she is performing a routine task that requires very little creativity or even attention (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 305). Freedom of action is thus actually an integral part of the alternate reality. It nevertheless deserves separate attention as it is another defining characteristic of play. The concept helps one make a distinction between an activity that is play and an activity that is not play.

Equivalence

When we play, freedom of action also comes with a sense of *equivalence*. Specifically, we are often asked to equate ourselves with a role or with another (potential) player. Where the former concerns a substantive equivalence, i.e. becoming something or someone else as the alternate reality dictates, the latter concerns social equivalence, i.e. a resistance to any power hierarchy that is not part of the alternate reality itself. Huizinga seemed to consider a sense of equivalence an integral part of the created alternate reality (1938/1950, 38). Caillois is one of the few play theorists who discusses substantive and social equivalence very explicitly. Players could be asked to become a certain character, take on a certain role, or more figuratively to equate themselves with a state of mind or feeling. Regardless of the exact nature of the equation, the player is asked to transform him-/herself, i.e. to become something within the alternate reality (Caillois 1958/1961, 23-26). Players also equate themselves with other players. They are asked to see themselves as equal to other players, or to resist any power hierarchy external to the

alternate reality. If the roles that players take on in the alternate reality are different and conflicting, players need to be offered and convinced of an equality of chance (Caillois 1958/1961, 14-19; De Koven 1978, 34). This way play can (though it does not have to) be a competition, i.e. a comparative test of the players' abilities (Sutton-Smith 1997, 74-75).

Substantive and social equivalence are not always apparent when we play. There are numerous instances of play imaginable where no equation takes place. Play is not always multiplayer, nor is it always a competition. Play also does not necessarily involve a person becoming someone or something else. Yet I argue that when we start to play we always figuratively equate ourselves with other potential players. In other words, play is always based on equal freedom of action. We agree that the alternate reality is a level playing field. Stepping into the alternate reality is meant to seem easy and uniform; it should be something that anyone can do. As such social equivalence is always relevant, even though it might not be apparent.

Engagement

Equal freedom of action is only meaningful when players actually exhibit it. This means that it is important that each player is active, i.e. that each player actually does something with the equally afforded freedom of action. Without player activity, play does not manifest, does not become an actual experience and therefore ends up never existing in the first place. Yet player activity is arguably not the most fitting term, as players do not have to be physically and observably active when playing. Several play theorists offer other concepts to explain what exactly is required of the player to truly instantiate play, of which *engagement* is arguably most common.

Salen & Zimmerman hinted towards engagement when defining play as a 'system of experience that always includes some kind of sensory input, player output, and internal player cognition' (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 316). This 'system of experience' can be understood as learning by continuous trial and error (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 315). Without this continuous loop of input, processing and output play does not instantiate. Moreover, without this loop a player is not engaged. A player will not use the afforded freedom of action effectively when he/she is not involved in a system of experience within the alternate reality. Closely related is the theory of 'flow', i.e. a state of consciousness that occurs when an activity is both challenging and doable (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). Ideally, a player is so engaged that he/she is in a state of flow, i.e. the player is so involved in the system of experience that he/she might lose track of time and find the experience simply fun (De Koven 1978, 42; Huizinga 1938/1950, 38; Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 336-339; Sutton-Smith 1997, 184-186). Indeed, game and play designers can use these theories to try to ensure that players actually bring a game to life and find playing it fun, allowing both players and designers to confidently call the game a play experience.

External inconsequence

Being engaged in an alternate reality that offers equal freedom of action to its players can be daunting, if not dangerous. A final concept helps ease such feelings: *external inconsequence*. Arguably, the reason we actually allow ourselves to engage in alternate realities with equally afforded freedom of action is because we agree that whatever we do during play by default has limited to no consequences outside of the alternate reality.

The notion of external inconsequence is again somewhat an integral part of an alternate reality, especially to those play theorists who already defined the alternate reality as being not serious, unreal or 'frivolous' (Sutton-Smith 1997, 201-207). Yet several play theorists pay explicit attention to external inconsequence and uphold a more nuanced view when naming play 'voluntary' (Huizinga 1938/1950, 36; Sutton-Smith 1997, 174), 'unproductive' (Caillois 1958/1961, 10) or simply 'safe' (De Koven 1978, 16-17). As such they argue that play not only takes place in an alternate reality, but that it has no consequence to other realities. Caillois argued that once play has an external consequence, it simply no longer is play. To substantiate his argument he provided examples of professional players making a living of playing sports like boxing (1958/1961, 45). Arguably professional play (i.e. play to make a living) can indeed feel like a unique and somewhat strange form of play at least. Once play has an external consequence, freedom of action is influenced by an external factor. In this case, action is determined by whether the player makes money of it. Thus it can be an important concept for terming an experience 'play', even though this is clearly a subject of debate among game and play scholars (see e.g. Consalvo 2009; Malaby 2007).

Regardless of the continuing play-theoretical debates, I argue that the applicability of the aforementioned five concepts can most clearly render an experience one of play. The experience of work can also be a play experience, provided the workers find the play concepts to some extent applicable. The common dichotomy between play and work thus can be false, as some have argued already (for an in-depth discussion see Mainemelis and Ronson 2006, 115). Play theorist McGonigal sees play as a form of work (2011, 29-31), while organization theorists Reeves and Read prefer to see work as play when realizing that play is 'an important component of attention, involvement, and productivity, and it's capable of energizing behavior of all sorts' (2009, 173). Employees do not have to deem play and work separate experiences, provided the organization they work for has a playful organizational culture.

VALUES OF A PLAYFUL ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

The question remains what values employees would uphold in an organization to ensure all employees would continuously experience their work as play. In other words, it is as yet unclear how the five concepts that render an experience play can be translated to values for collaboration and communication that employees of a playful organization would uphold. In this section I offer an answer by discussing six values of a playful organizational culture: contingency, opportunism, equivalence, instructiveness, meritocracy and conviviality.

I developed the values after defining the five concepts of play and reviewing contemporary publications of organization and management theory that originated from play theory or common notions of play. As to the selection of the latter publications, I have included relatively recent publications that explicitly refer to theories or notions of play (Capodagli and Jackson 2002/2007; 2010; Kane 2003; Levy 2011; Mainemelis and Ronson 2006; McGonigal 2011; Pink 2009; Reeves and Read 2009; Semler 1993; 2003). Together these publications offer insights into how organizations could be playful in general and how at least 17 organizations in particular are apparently quite playful already. The list of playful organizations includes Google (Capodagli and Jackson 2010; Levy 2011; Mainemelis and Ronson 2006), Disney (Capodagli and Jackson 2002/2007), Pixar (Capodagli and Jackson 2010), Semco (Semler 1993; 2003), the Quest to Learn school (McGonigal 2011) and the Scottish Media Group (Kane 2003). Having reviewed

the selected publications, I defined the six values as befitting any playful organization, regardless of its size or the branch it operates in.

I discuss the six values below. To aid the reader's understanding of the value, I first offer a principle (italicized), i.e. a normative statement that best explicates the value being discussed.

Contingency

Employees appreciate uncertainty and eventuality, rendering an organizational goal that is well-defined and instrumental irrelevant.

By adopting *contingency* as a value employees of a playful organization embrace uncertainty and eventuality. The value is derived from the instantiation of an alternate reality and the accompanying equal freedom of action that comes with play (see also Malaby 2007 for a discussion about play and contingency). For these concepts to be applicable to an organization, its culture would have to encompass an openness towards new ideas for tasks, processes, products and services, because it realizes the opportunities rather than threats of continuous innovation. Appreciating employees to come up with new ideas stems from a view of employees as players with equal freedom of action. More importantly, new ideas effectively envision the organization in an alternate reality. Instead of pursuing a well-defined instrumental goal, i.e. a target statement that includes the means to efficiently reach it in a timely manner, a playful organization will thus resort to adopting a longer-term and arguably vaguer goal for itself. Employees would accept that, because they value the contingency that comes with play, i.e. the uncertainty and eventuality of an alternate reality in which players have equal freedom of action.

Many authors express the value of contingency when analyzing how leaders of a playful organization (should) develop its goal, vision or mission statement. Kane (2003, 257) as well as Mainemelis and Ronson (2006, 89-90) refer to contingency specifically when discussing how an organization that embraces play effectively embraces uncertainty and risk-taking. Some refer to it when advising leaders to develop 'epic goals' (McGonigal 2011, 55-57) or goals that are neither 'narrow' nor short-term (Pink 2009, 45, 50-51) to inspire employee efforts without constraining them. Others refer to contingency when advising leaders to develop a 'unified vision' as effectively a good story rather than a goal statement (Capodagli and Jackson 2002/2007, 42-44; 2010, 25). These types of goals or visions thus not only inspire employees without constraining them, they also ensure that employees adhere to at least some basic principles, true to the idea of play as an alternate reality.

Opportunism

Employees can act on any opportunity to develop or fulfill tasks, as long as it fits the organization's goal or vision.

By subsequently adopting *opportunism* as a value employees of a playful organization not only freely develop new ideas, but also act on practically any opportunities to materialize them. This value is derived from the equal freedom of action and engagement that comes with play. These play concepts make it both possible and imperative for every employee to find and take opportunities befitting the organization's epic long-term goal or unified vision. Indeed, with only a vague goal or vision, possibilities for action are multifold and need to be sought after actively.

Some express the value of opportunism somewhat when emphasizing the autonomy employees should have in a playful organization (Pink 2009; Semler 1993; 2003). Pink makes a distinction between several forms of autonomy employees should experience in a playful organization, i.e. autonomy by being able to define one's own work tasks, times, techniques and teams (2009, 79-91). Befitting the value of autonomy is manufacturing organization Semco's policy for having management and leadership explicitly *not* define any procedures and process descriptions (Semler 1993; 2003). General employee autonomy is indeed an important starting point for a playful organization. Yet, like employee independence or empowerment (Pink 2009, 79), autonomy can be insufficient for an organization to be highly playful. The play concept of engagement demands more than the value of autonomy offers. The value of opportunism arguably befits the play concept of engagement better than autonomy does.

Other authors indeed express the value of opportunism more clearly when emphasizing that a playful organization should explicitly incentivize and instigate risk-taking. The perhaps best-known example is Google's policy to let employees spend 20% of their time on pursuing their own ideas for new products (Levy 2011, 162-164; Pink 2009, 82). Other authors simply emphasize opportunism when stating that playful organizations give employees 'leave to try crazy ideas' (Capodagli and Jackson 2010, 28), let them take 'adaptive, imaginative and passionate' actions (Kane 2003, 62) or let them 'take risks, to let their off-the-wall ideas take flight' (Capodagli and Jackson 2002/2007, 47, 128). Authors subsequently derive the value of opportunism from an appreciation for continuous trial-and-error learning, i.e. repeated failure until success is finally reached (Capodagli and Jackson 2010, 62-64; Mainemelis and Ronson 2006, 83; Reeves and Read 2009, 89).

Equivalence

Employees have equal opportunities for action and growth regardless of hierarchical differences.

Strengthening the value of opportunism is the value of *equivalence*. The play concept of the same name is indeed easily applied when conceptualizing a playful organizational culture. The social equivalence one experiences when playing is arguably also valued in a playful organization. This does not mean that a playful organization is devoid of a hierarchical division of decision-making power. On the contrary, if it is deemed functional a playful organization's employees can appreciate a power hierarchy as simply part of 'the rules of the game', i.e. part of the alternate reality that the organization effectively is. Yet social equivalence makes employees value a level playing field and equal chances for growth. Those higher up the power hierarchy are thus fellow players who have 'reached the next level'. As a result employees communicate and collaborate quite informally with one another, despite possible differences in decision-making power. Moreover, in a playful organization a power hierarchy does not immediately inhibit an employee's actions. The concept of freedom of action and the aforementioned value of opportunism renders the power hierarchy unable to limit employee actions *a priori*. An employee higher up the hierarchy can only limit a lower employee's actions either at the request of the actual employee or in hindsight, probably by making him/her realize that although initiatives are always highly encouraged, in this instance the initiative has failed. Indeed, in the trial-and-error environment of a playful organization, such a relationship with management can emerge.

The consulted publications show that a playful organization can express equivalence in several ways. The aforementioned relationship between management and professionals seems to apply to Google quite well. According to Levy, Google was hesitant to introduce a new management layer as its leaders did not want ‘managers telling engineers what to do’ (2011, 160). A lack of *a priori* decision-making power can make one wonder how many layers of management are actually needed in a playful organization. Indeed, some authors realize that a playful organization’s hierarchy might be less extensive, i.e. ‘flatter’ (Kane 2003, 276; Levy 2011, 158; Pink 2009, 30). Equivalence is also expressed in other ways. Capodagli and Jackson showed that equivalence can also be expressed by letting any employee attend certain test and feedback opportunities despite possible hierarchical differences. In other words, an organization can be playful by ‘toppling hierarchical barriers’ (Capodagli and Jackson 2002/2007, 89-90. See also Semler 1993; 2003). Pixar apparently allows all levels of the organization to attend management presentations with the aim of getting as much feedback as possible on an undergoing movie project (Capodagli and Jackson 2010, 42). Similarly, Disney allowed all levels of the organization to test the rides at Disneyland, again with the aim of getting feedback (Capodagli and Jackson 2002/2007, 8). Equivalence can also be expressed by basing the entire organization on teamwork, i.e. relatively small groups of people who self-organize to do certain (sub-)projects. Many authors indeed stress the importance of teams in an organization that values play (Capodagli and Jackson 2002/2007, 90; 2010, 38; Levy 2011, 162; Reeves and Read 2009, 129-133).

Instructiveness

Employees have opportunities for all sorts of educational and helpful experiences.

An arguably small step from equivalence is the value of *instructiveness*, i.e. the value of letting employees learn in whatever shape or form. The play concepts of equivalence and engagement make instructiveness an important value for a playful organization. By allowing employees to learn and understand the alternate reality they find themselves in, they are able to become engaged, i.e. to actually contribute opportunistically. Moreover, when viewing play as inherently a trial-and-error learning process on a whole, the value is arguably quite obvious. As the concept of social equivalence should enable *anyone* to play, a playful organization will need to encompass a general value of instructiveness to allow *all* employees to learn about and understand the alternate reality they find themselves in, i.e. the basic rules stipulated in the organization’s goal or vision statement.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which a playful organization can express its instructiveness is through an extensive internal education program. In such programs employees not only train relevant job skills, but also develop an understanding of and appreciation for the organization’s goal or vision. Capodagli and Jackson stress especially the latter form of education when describing Disney’s and Pixar’s extensive ‘University’ programs (2002/2007, 150; 2010, 47-49). Levy also mentions a ‘Google University’, i.e. Google’s internal education program (2011, 136), but emphasizes how Google adopted instructiveness wholeheartedly after moving into the ‘campus’ formerly owned by Silicon Graphics (2011, 131-135). As ‘Google was simply a continuation of the campus life that many Googlers had only recently left’ (Levy 2011, 135), the popularity of e.g. technical lectures, book talks and other educational activities was understandable, rendering Google indeed quite playful.

Yet there are other ways in which a playful organization can express its instructiveness. A playful organization will often stimulate (internally) sharing information and knowledge

(Semler 1993; 2003). In Google this openness is evident from the project management systems and knowledge repositories that any employee is free to consult (Levy 2011, 164). Reeves and Read acknowledge the importance of openness in the form of 'knowledge equity' (2009, 133), being an important prerequisite for good teamwork. They therefore also suggest the use of 'avatars' in a work organization as digital representations of employees complete with highly informative expertise statistics (2009, 64-65). Besides openness, instructiveness can also be evident from the empathy employees generally have towards one another, rendering them willing to educate or help whenever needed (Capodagli and Jackson 2010, 53). This connects closely to the idea of employees constantly providing and getting feedback, e.g. about what stage a project is in or how team members are contributing to a project (McGonigal 2011, 57-58; Pink 2009, 62; Reeves and Read 2009, 71-75). Finally, instructiveness can also be expressed through what McGonigal calls 'naches': 'a vicarious pride from playing over someone else's shoulder, and giving advice and encouragement' (2011, 87).

Meritocracy

Employees are socially recognized for their efforts and competence that help the organization pursue its goal or vision.

By adopting *meritocracy* as a value employees of a playful organization are socially recognized for the efforts and competence they exhibit (Saunders 1995; Young 1958). Social recognition is essentially an increase in social status, i.e. a means for explicitly and generally recognizing an employee's worth to the organization. The value stems from the play concepts engagement and equivalence. Many psychologists argue that social recognition of one's efforts and competencies is very engaging (McGonigal 2011, 49; Pink 2009, 64-65; Reeves and Read 2009, 75, 79; Ryan and Deci 2000). Thus to an extent a meritocracy safeguards engagement. A meritocracy's design is arguably just as important as its effect. The play concept of equivalence makes it important for a playful organization to be generally and consistently meritocratic. Thus employees with higher social status should be socially recognized in the exact same manner (using the same conditions and with the same amount of status increase as a result) as those with lower social status.

Many of the reviewed publications acknowledge the importance of meritocracy and offer some suggestions for how the organization could express it. McGonigal acknowledges meritocracy when arguing how powerful 'prosocial emotions, most notably compassion and admiration' (2011, 82) are and when seeing 'social engagement as more intrinsically rewarding' (2011, 91). Capodagli and Jackson adopt the value of meritocracy in their call for managers to 'support, empower, and reward employees' (2002/2007, 10, 162-163). Game designers apply the value of meritocracy when they immediately afford players with points for doing (i.e. exhibiting effort) something well (i.e. exhibiting competence) and subsequently have the game communicate the points to all other players, e.g. through a leaderboard. The same could apply in a playful organization, as some authors argue. Reeves and Read suggest the introduction of 'social micropayments' (2009, 79), where employees reward each other with a virtual currency for proven effort and competence. Google adopted a similar system when managers instigated a game to incentivize employees to improve performance of existing Google products (Levy 2011, 186-187). Teams needed to ensure their products passed a performance benchmark, or they would accrue 'a debt that had to be paid off by barter with a team that exceeded its benchmarks' (Levy 2011, 186). This way the game offered social recognition to all employees whose products passed the performance benchmark. The game-based school Quest to Learn also

applies the value of meritocracy as it allows learners to 'level up' based on proven competence and efforts to help 'students build real esteem among their peers' (McGonigal 2011, 130-131).

Conviviality

Employees communicate informally and are generally humorous about their work.

By finally adopting *conviviality* as a value employees of a playful organization find a sense of humor and informality important. Four play concepts introduce conviviality within the playful organization's culture: engagement, alternate reality, external inconsequence and equality. In an organizational culture that encompasses conviviality employees often joke and communicate informally with each other as it is a sign of both their engagement and their equivalence. Conviviality thus entails employees interacting and chit-chatting about anything, both work-related and personal, as long as its informal or humorous. Besides it being a sign of equivalence, conviviality is also a sign of pleasure or fun. Since a sense of fun is arguably a result of engagement, conviviality is also a show of engagement.

The play concepts of alternate reality and external inconsequence also help induce conviviality in an organization. Conviviality allows members to joke about, make fun of or simply step back and ironically observe the organization's goal and their own attempts to pursue it. It thus allows employees to reflect on the organization and themselves. By adopting conviviality as a value employees can again see their work as play, i.e. as something that is a reality in itself that stands on an equal footing with other realities their lives consist of. More importantly, conviviality allows employees to come to terms with the value of contingency. Thanks to a convivial atmosphere employees actually dare to take the risks the playful organization requires them to take. Reflecting positively, ironically and humorously on taken risks allows employees to effectively delude themselves that their risk-taking is consequence-free, as trial-and-error is simply 'part of the game'. It also allows employees to see their failures as not automatically having personal consequences. Thus when employees regard their organization as figuratively an alternate reality without external consequences, conviviality emerges.

Several authors express the value of conviviality when identifying the importance of having a sense of informality, pleasure and humor. Capodagli and Jackson express the value when arguing that a good morale, a sense of humor and employee socializing are indicators of a playful organization (2002/2007, 136; 2010, 67-68). Google seems to value conviviality by including the ability to be sociable or pleasurable in their applicant selection criteria (i.e. the 'Googliness' factor, Levy 2011, 138-139) and by greatly valuing humor every year on April 1 (Levy 2011, 123-124). McGonigal acknowledges a need for a convivial environment to ensure that employees embrace the contingency and opportunism that comes with a playful organization (2011, 64-67). In other words, in a playful organization failure is fun, because 'the more we fail, the more eager we are to do better' (McGonigal 2011, 66). Or more subtly, a playful organization needs to embrace informality as it is a "possibility machine", ... and those who manage its boundaries have to be relaxed about the possibilities that might ensue' (Kane 2003, 285).

CONCLUSION

In this article I developed a theory of a playful organizational culture, having reviewed several works of play theory as well as organization/management theory based on play. The presented theory is essentially one of the conventions, norms and values for

collaboration and communication that employees would uphold to ensure they could play within their organizations. Having identified five contextual and behavioral concepts of play, I argued that a playful organizational culture would encompass contingency, opportunism, equivalence, instructiveness, meritocracy and conviviality as values.

The worth of the theory here presented lies firstly in the design possibilities it offers. Using the theory one can design play activities as contained moments of playful organization, i.e. as moments in which at least some of the playful values temporarily apply. Van Bree and Copier (2010) offer an example by describing a game designed for a hospital in which at least contingency and equivalence seemed to be valued for the purpose of developing a new social structure. Farther-reaching design possibilities are also possible. Befitting experiments with ‘gamification’, one could imagine managers implementing social structures or systems based on some of the playful values. As mentioned earlier, some authors offer the example of implementing scoring and status allocation systems (Edery and Mollick 2008, 163-165; Reeves and Read 2009, 79). The rationale behind such systems is the common gaming principle of immediate and broadly shared positive feedback. Yet underlying this principle are the values of equivalence and meritocracy, i.e. offering employees equal opportunities for growth and social recognition. Other authors offer the example of implementing social networking technologies across an organization (Reeves et al 2007). Again, the immediate rationale behind such technologies is the deemed importance of openness and sharing knowledge. Yet underlying this importance are the values of equivalence and instructiveness, i.e. having employees feel a sense of equality and helpfulness throughout the organization.

By realizing the play-theoretical origins of playful endeavors such as the above, one can also use the presented playful organizational culture theory in evaluations of these endeavors. In other words, some if not all of the values here presented might turn out to be predictors for the success of playful endeavors in organizations. For example, without a meritocratic organizational culture, immediate and broadly shared positive feedback in the form of scoring and status allocation systems perhaps makes no sense. Moreover, without an organizational culture that values equivalence and instructiveness, freely and constantly sharing knowledge across an organization through social networking technologies also perhaps makes no sense. Following their survey at IBM Reeves and Read indeed realize the importance of having a playful organizational culture when trying to apply notions of play to leadership (2009, 171). Overall the theory here presented could thus be useful for further design-scientific research.

The theory could also be useful for *social*-scientific research. With organizations successfully applying games or playful social structures and systems, a widely observable playful organizational culture could in time be instigated. Organizational culture theory suggests that this might then lead to even more structural changes (Alvesson 2002; Cameron and Quinn 2006). Organizational studies could thus shed light on the emergence of both playful organizational cultures *and* structures, as well as on the opportunities and threats they create. Arguably, to enable such social-scientific research further theoretical work would first need to be done. The socio-cultural perspective on a playful organization offered in this article is only one out of many (see e.g. Hassard 1993). The perspective could be complemented by e.g. management-sociological and socio-technical perspectives. Using the concepts of a playful organizational culture here presented one could further theorize about playful social structures and managerial practices. One example of an arguably playful social structure is the ‘Imagineering’ group at Disney, whose purpose is ‘to carry on the Disney tradition by dreaming up new creative venues,

such as the theme park attractions' (Capodagli and Jackson 2002/2007, 19). Loose or flat hierarchies (Reeves and Read 2009, 7) or temporary forms of leadership (Reeves and Read 2009, 164) could also be interpreted as playful social structures. From a socio-technical perspective one could theorize about playful approaches towards information and communication technologies. Reeves and Read suggested such a playful approach when discussing the use of multiple easily reconfigurable communication systems (2009, 84-88). Overall a playful organization ideal-type could be further developed and empirically researched to ascertain its relevance.

DISCUSSION

There are some issues concerning the approach I have taken to develop a playful organizational culture theory, as well as the theory itself. Concerning the approach I note three main issues. Firstly, other works of play theory or organization/management theory based on play could have been selected. It is arguably impossible to select all relevant publications. Not only is it difficult to oversee all relevant publications, one can extensively debate their relevance as well. Secondly, although play theory was a useful starting point, an alternative approach could have been taken. There are in fact already several publications in which a playfulness theory was further developed (e.g. Glynn and Webster 1992; 1993). Although definitions of playfulness are insightful, they will always be inextricably linked to play. As such it is arguably more useful to confer the original source (play theory) instead of its derivative (playfulness theory). Given its linkage to play one can assume that the presented playful organizational culture theory would not be very different if it had been developed from playfulness theory. Still, the theory here presented is not absolute. Other concepts of a playful organizational culture could be defined. The history of play theory shows that the term 'play' is hardly neatly definable, which is unsurprising given the fact that play itself is highly dynamic. The relatively recent emergence of other forms of play shows how play can 'play' with itself, e.g. live-action role play where external inconsequence is seemingly an irrelevant concept (Harviainen 2011).

As to the presented theory I note three main issues. Underlying the question how an organization can be playful is an assumption that organizations are generally or even by definition non-playful. Indeed, in both this article and many of the reviewed publications play and work are first juxtaposed before they are reconciled to argue for a playful perspective on organization. This firstly suggests that I define the playful organization as the counterpart of another ideal-type: the bureaucracy (Weber 1946/1947). To some extent this is indeed the case. The value of contingency clearly does not apply to a bureaucracy. However, some argue that bureaucracies are highly meritocratic as well (Cameron and Quinn 2006, 37). As such it is better to view a bureaucracy as a least playful organization rather than a non-playful one. By initially juxtaposing work to play I also suggest that organizations are at present generally not playful. Yet I do not assume this, just like Weber did not assume that empirically all organizations are bureaucracies. Weber's ideal-type epistemology entailed theorizing about organizations in a utopian manner with the goal of enabling empirical research. Thus both the bureaucracy and the playful organization are theoretical extremities that organizations might never fully conform to. I therefore acknowledge that the theory here presented is empirically simplistic. This empirical simplicity is evident from Lashinsky, for example, who described Apple as in some ways an apparently playful organization and in others 'a brutal and unforgiving place, where accountability is strictly enforced, decisions are swift, and communication is articulated clearly from the top' (2011).

A final issue concerns the positive rhetoric playful organization theorists often apply. Admittedly, playful organizations probably have weaknesses as well. As became evident from Leavitt's work (2005), bureaucratic organizations have the benefit of both reliably and efficiently reaching well-defined goals. Thus the playful organization presumably might not. Indeed, Capodagli and Jackson (2002/2007; 2010) showed that both Disney and Pixar are known for spending huge budgets and delaying product delivery. The question is, however, whether this is problematic. Both Disney and Pixar have thrived on their commercial successes, even if production was inefficient and delivery was late. Yet it should again be noted that both organizations base their entire existence on innovation, specifically on developing new entertainment products and services. This, of course, hardly applies to all organizations. For an organization thriving on the delivery of large quantities of a long-existing product in a well-defined manner, efficiency and dependability are very relevant. In those cases playfulness is thus not immediately relevant. In time researchers could offer more insights into the weaknesses of playful organizations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author greatly thanks the four anonymous reviewers for their extensive and constructive feedback as it helped improve the article tremendously.

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