Serious Play as a Practice of Paradox

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Abstract

A recent stream of organizational research has used the term *serious play* to describe situations in which people engage in playful behaviors deliberately with the intention to achieve serious, work-related objectives. In this article, the authors reflect on the ambiguity of this term, and reframe serious play as a practice characterized by the paradox of intentionality (when actors engage deliberately in a fun, intrinsically motivating activity as a means to achieve a serious, extrinsically motivated work objective). This reframing not only extends the explanatory power of the concept of serious play but also helps bridge the concerns of scholars and practitioners: first, by enabling us to understand a variety of activities in organizations as serious play, which can help practitioners address specific organizational challenges; second, by recognizing the potential for emergent serious play, and the creation of the conditions to foster this emergence; third, by pointing toward specific, individual or group-level outcomes associated with the practice; and finally, by uncovering its ethical dimensions and encouraging the understanding of the role of serious play on ethical decision making.

Keywords

serious play, practice theory, paradox of intentionality

Introduction

A recent stream of organizational research has used the term *serious play* to describe situations in which people engage in playful behaviors deliberately with the intention to achieve work-related objectives (Beech, Burns, de Caestecker, MacIntosh, &

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MacLean, 2004; Statler, Roos & Victor, 2009). Within this literature, researchers have identified a range of distinct contextual elements and process components that are not commonly part of the adult workplace, including, for example, the use of materials such as Lego bricks and the involvement of the physical body in the construction of meaning (Roos, Victor, & Statler, 2004). Research has also associated serious play activities with various processes and outcomes, such as strategic thinking (Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008), strategic innovation (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2005; Jacobs & Statler, 2005), and the development of ethical leadership habits (Holliday, Statler, & Flanders, 2007).

Although these research findings to date paint a compelling picture of a potentially valuable phenomenon that merits greater attention from both scholars as well as practitioners, taken as a whole they emphasize the ambiguity of the concept of serious play, as well as its possible application in organizations. In this article, we argue that this ambiguity arises in part because the term *serious play* refers to a kind of paradox that can bridge both theory and practice.

This article has two main objectives: first, to make a theoretical contribution to the existing stream of research by framing serious play as a form of practice, characterized by the paradox of intentionality. We define this paradox as arising when actors engage deliberately in fun, intrinsically motivated activities to achieve serious, work-related objectives. Therefore, serious play occurs when the paradox of intentionality arises. In this context, we draw from what has been called "the practice turn in contemporary theory" and employ the term *practice* to refer to "embodied, materially mediated arrays of activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding" (Schatzki, Cetina & Von Savigny, 2001, p. 2). We thus reframe serious play as a practice that occurs whenever organizational actors submit to a paradox of intentionality—that is, when people engage deliberately in a fun, intrinsically motivating activity as a means to achieve a serious, extrinsically motivated work objective.

The second objective of this article is to use our framing of serious play as a practice characterized by the paradox of intentionality, to explore how it can address both scholars' and practitioners' concerns. We suggest that this framing can help close the gap between scholars and practitioners through first, enabling us to understand a variety of activities in organizations as serious play; second, recognizing emergent serious play, third, through understanding specific, disaggregated outcomes of this practice, and finally through uncovering its ethical dimensions.

We begin by considering definitions of play, work, and serious play in particular, and by reviewing the existing organizational research to identify the various contexts, process characteristics, and outcomes associated with serious play. We then introduce the concept of practice, following Schatzki et al. (2001), and reframe serious play as a practice that involves sustaining a paradox of intentionality. We then demonstrate how the notion of serious play as a practice of paradox can not only encompass the cognitive, social, emotional and embodied dimensions of experience previously identified as relevant by organizational researchers but also extend the descriptive power of the term so that it sheds light on a variety of organizational phenomena not understood

heretofore as serious play. Finally, we explore the implications of this theoretical contribution for both scholars and practitioners.

Taking Play Seriously at Work

Initial Definition(s) of Play

Play has consistently been viewed by philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists as a complex form of human activity most often with a social dimension that is vitally important for cognitive, social, and emotional development. In this context, we define *play* as an intrinsically motivated, fun activity, carried out recursively in the form of a practice, typically (but not exclusively) in the context of social relationships. Psychological research has indicated that play activities allow people to develop cognitive and emotional capacities necessary for effective, productive work (Piaget, 1958; Vygotsky, 1978; Winnicott, 1971). As Bateson (2000) noted in his essay on "a theory of play and fantasy," play is metacommunicative, establishing a paradoxical frame where the messages in the play process simultaneously denote that "this is play," and at the same time denote actual, non–play-related events.

Sociologists in turn have portrayed play as an activity through which people frame and adapt the social relationships involved in organizational life (Goffman, 1974). Anthropologists have addressed play as a process through which people develop and adapt the cultural identities expressed in and through organizations (Huizenga, 1950; Turner, 1982). Philosophers have argued that playful exercise of the imagination is a condition for the possibility of ethical judgment, as people can envision different scenarios and make appropriate judgments (Freydberg, 1997; Kant, 1970/1987; Plato, 1968). Organizational researchers have additionally recognized that play at the workplace can have significant benefits such as learning, personal fulfillment, and even performance (e.g., Hatch, 1999; Ibarra, 2003; Sandelands & Buckner, 1989; Starbuck & Webster, 1991); despite the possibility of unintended consequences to corporate-imposed fun such as employee cynicism (Fleming, 2005).

Throughout these various literatures, play is conceptualized at an experiential level as involving paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty. This aspect of play can take different forms depending on the matter at hand. Games such as roulette are based, for example, on the purely mathematical uncertainty of chance—the ball will stop on one number eventually, but that number cannot be known with any certainty in advance. In contrast, competitive online strategy games such as World of Warcraft depend on a tactical uncertainty about how to respond to unexpected actions taken by other players. In still a different sense, the ambiguity of play can be expressed through the liminal space (Turner, 1982) in which broad cultural dynamics are refracted at a micro level of scale, as in the oft-cited case of Balinese cockfighting (Geertz, 1973).

In all these cases, the uncertainty or ambiguity of play is associated with positive affect, with the "fun" or "enjoyment" that people experience while playing. In various languages, these emotions are associated at an etymological level with the definition

of "play" (Huizenga, 1950). But from a developmental perspective, the ambiguity of play provides a frame within which humans can express adaptive variations (Sutton-Smith, 1997). As noted above, these adaptive variations may emerge at cognitive, social, and emotional levels of experience, and they can have significant impacts on individuals, groups, and even societies. So why, if the adaptive benefits of play appear so compelling, are people not playing all the time?

The answer to this question requires us to differentiate play from work in terms of their instrumentality. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has introduced the term *autotelic* to describe the intrinsic motivation to play—in many instances, humans play not because it leads to some outcome, goal, or telos, but because it is enjoyable as an end in itself. Work, in contrast, is usually understood, for example, in the functionalist literature (Donaldson, 1996), as an activity that has a determinate goal, an outcome that provides people with extrinsic motivation to pursue it. Those people who find intrinsic motivation in their work, in contrast, often say that they do not regard it as "work" in the commonly understood meaning of the term. Work serves instrumentally to produce something other than itself, whereas people are motivated to engage in play mostly because they enjoy it.

Having said that, we must be careful not to draw the distinction between autotelic and goal-oriented behaviors too sharply, however. After all, play can manifestly have functional consequences for societies and groups, and it appears that individuals may engage in play instrumentally as a means to achieve other objectives. For example, the autotelic nature of play does not preclude a variety of individual motivations to engage in it, including, for example, the desire to enhance social capital or improve physical fitness, depending on the circumstances and nature of the play activity. In some instances, people in organizations may be explicitly and regularly motivated to juxtapose frivolous play and productive work precisely in order to experiment with the ambiguity and enable adaptive variation. In this light, the difference between play and work may appear as a matter of degree, and it may additionally be contingent on a range of individual and contextual factors. Still, the distinction remains salient, because as soon as people become overly motivated to use play instrumentally to achieve such variation, highlighting extrinsic production goals rather than intrinsic enjoyment, the ambiguity can fade, the activity can become less fun, and the adaptive potential can be diminished.

In the following section, we will consider how the organizational research focused on "serious play" raises a series of questions about how that ambivalent relationship between work and play can be deliberately and productively exploited in specific contexts.

Raising Questions About the Relationship Between Work and Play in Organizational Development

The term *serious play* has been introduced into organizational studies literatures as a way to describe instances in which play and work are deliberately and meaningfully

juxtaposed. The existing research focuses on a series of distinct organizational contexts and outcomes.

With respect to work contexts, researchers using participatory, collaborative methods have experimented in multiple cases with the use of serious play as an intervention technique that provides an alternative or complement to more traditional processes of strategy development (e.g., Bürgi & Roos, 2003; Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008; Roos et al., 2004). Following a call to shed light on the black box in which strategy is created by organizational actors (Roos & Victor, 1999), other researchers have inverted the order of logical priority and conceptualized strategy creation as a form of serious play (Jacobs & Statler, 2005).

A related line of argument presents serious play as a "technology of foolishness" that can complement "technologies of reason" in the context of scenario planning processes (Jacobs & Statler, 2006). The utility of such "foolishness" has been addressed in the context of product development, where the concept of serious play has been used to describe prototyping processes in which designers take a playful, nondirectional attitude toward a series of possible, simulated solutions to a design problem (Schrage, 2000).

Researchers have addressed the relevance of serious play in the context of leadership development (Holliday et al., 2007) and organization development in terms of constructing physical analogs through playful processes (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006). Finally, following Gergen (1991), the experience of serious play has been explored in reference to more generalized notions of social interdependence as a process of working through paradoxes rather than resolving or removing the tensions, oppositions, and contradictions that arise in the course of everyday organizational life (Beech et al., 2004).

Within these various contexts, serious play has been associated with a variety of outcomes at distinct, though interdependent levels of analysis, including cognition, social dynamics, and affectivity.

Most broadly, serious play has been associated with the cognitive generation of new insights relevant for organizational practice in the contexts outlined above. These insights may include innovative strategy content (Jacobs & Statler, 2005; Roos et al., 2004; Statler & Oliver, 2008); innovative product designs (Schrage, 2000); the surfacing and expression of tacit knowledge (Oliver & Roos, 2007); and the facilitation of analogical reasoning in strategy (Statler, Jacobs, & Roos, 2008).

Serious play has also been associated with outcomes that exist at a social or intersubjective level. For example, researchers have argued that serious play enables the communication of new insights (Roos et al., 2004), the development of shared understanding (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006; Oliver & Roos, 2007; Roos & Victor, 1999), and the development of new ethical norms for social interaction (Holliday et al., 2007).

Finally, serious play has been associated with shifts and transformations at the emotional or affective level of experience, including coping with ambiguity and paradox (Beech et al., 2004); the development of greater commitment (Roos et al., 2004; Roos & Victor, 1999); the establishment of a safe context for emotional expression

(Oliver & Roos, 2007); and the overcoming of psychological defense mechanisms (Statler & Oliver, 2008).

An outline of indicative research on serious play in organizations is presented in Table 1. It is worth noting that in the interest of feasibility, the scope of Table 1 is limited to research that has explicitly employed the "serious play" label. We have not included research on activities that could potentially be interpreted as playful (e.g., role-playing or outbound activities). Nevertheless, as we discuss at length below, it is indeed legitimate and even desirable to view such activities as forms of serious play, an approach that can improve our understanding of their effects on organizations and how these effects are achieved.

Although the existing research identifies serious play as a phenomenon of potential interest to both organizational researchers and practitioners, taken as a whole, a series of important questions remain unanswered. Most important, in view of the variety of experiential process techniques used in the name of organizational development (OD), strategy development, leadership development, and so on, the existing literature does not identify with sufficient clarity what is actually serious play, and what is not. If someone wanted to design and facilitate a serious play process to achieve one or several of the outcomes associated with it in the literature, how would he or she proceed? How would he or she know if process participants had begun, or ceased, to play seriously?

We seek to address these basic questions in this article, but to do so, we first need to be clear about the epistemological assumptions that undergird our approach to the questions. Interpretive theory has shown that essentialist ontologies are problematic. Morgan's (1996) seminal work showed that organizations can be many things depending on the observer, the context, and the frame employed to understand them. Drawing from Eco's (1992) thoughts on textual interpretation, we can distinguish between a *semantic* reading of the concept of serious play (i.e., its etymology and dictionary meaning) and a *semiotic* reading (i.e., its meaning depending on its contexts of use and conceptual associations). The denotations or semantic meanings of the term *play* include both action-oriented elements ("to exercise, frolic, perform music") and emotional elements ("to rejoice, be glad").[1] A semiotic reading of the serious play concept, however, focuses on its connotations, on the situational and historical contexts and actors involved, and more broadly on the discourses and the varied interpretations through which it acquires meaning (Heracleous & Marshak, 2004).

From a semiotic perspective, therefore, we can say that the existing literature does not offer a single, coherent definition of what serious play is, but instead a divergent series of answers based on who is defining the term, and in what context. In one respect, the term *serious play* seems to refer to a concept of action, an abstract method for juxtaposing work and play in meaningful ways (e.g., Freydberg, 1997). In another respect, the term *serious play* seems to refer more concretely to a particular set of actions—many of the existing organizational studies focus, for example, on facilitated strategy processes (e.g., Roos et al., 2004). Most concretely, the term *serious play* is incorporated into the brand identity of an intervention technique that exclusively uses Lego bricks as a medium for communication and expression.[2]

Table 1. Indicative Research on Serious Play in Organizations

Reference	Organizational Context	Associated Outcomes	Key Definitional Elements
Roos and Victor (1999)	Strategy process	New ideas, shared meaning, deeper commitment	"The strategy-making process is described as a three-phase play process . . . [involving] constructing to stimulate new ideas, storytelling to share meaning and deep engagement to assimilate new direction" (p. 349).
Schrage (2000)	Innovation processes	Effective new product development	Serious play as simulation and instrumental means of innovating and developing new products.
Bürgi and Roos (2003)	Strategy process	Richer images of strategy content	"[A] highly multimodal tool . . . [that] allows rich organizational images to be physically constructed (use of kinaesthetic/haptic information), seen and visualized (use of visual information), and verbally enriched and evaluated (use of narrative information)" (p. 70).
Roos, Victor, and Statler (2004)	Strategy process	Innovative strategy content	"A mode of activity that draws on the imagination, integrates cognitive, social and emotional dimensions of experience and intentionally brings the emergent benefits of play to bear on organizational challenges" (p. 563).
Beech et al. (2004)	Organizational change	Coping with paradox	"Serious playfulness entails purposeful action, but action which is: driven by emotion and the body, not simply rationality; notable in its creativity in terms of both adherence to, and disruption of, rules; involves play between multiple meanings; challenges normal boundaries through experimentation" (p. 1316).
Jacobs and Statler (2005)	Strategy process	Creation of strategy	"Create the conditions for the possibility of the emergence of new forms of meaning and new patterns of action" (p. 51).
Buergi, Jacobs, and Roos (2005)	Strategy process	Crafting strategy	Strategy as embodied, recursive enactment
Jacobs and Heracleous (2006)	Organizational development	Enactment of strategic metaphors	"Embodied metaphors draws on metaphorical reasoning not only as a cognitive-verbal exercise, but also as a tactile, bodily experience that results in collectively constructed metaphors, metaphors in the flesh" (p. 221).
Jacobs and Statler (2006)	Scenario development	Richer scenario content	"Serious play provides a technology of foolishness that can complement the technologies of reason commonly deployed in scenario-planning processes" (p. 84).
Holliday, Statler, and Flanders (2007)	Leadership development	Practically wise leadership habits	"Seriously playful process techniques . . . provide an occasion for participants to experiment with new social frames for interaction with diverse others, and thereby, to encounter and develop ethical norms" (p. 129).
Statler and Oliver (2008)	Organizational decision-making	Development of adaptive potential	Facilitators intervened "in organizational systems using a process that introduced a new medium for communication and gave participants the opportunity to approach their organizational problems with a playful attitude, or mode of intentionality" (p. 484).
Statler, Jacobs, and Roos (2008)	Strategy process	Reasoning analogically to create new knowledge	"A specific analogical reasoning technique that deliberately integrates non-cognitive and non-discursive elements of human experience, in the interest of developing new knowledge and new forms of interaction between people" (p. 137).

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Is there any way in which the spectrum of variation between these two significations—roughly phrased, the conceptualization and the enactment of serious play—might be integrated in and through practice? We believe so, as has, for example, been shown by Socrates who simultaneously conceptualized and enacted serious play as he wandered around Athens playfully performing the dialectical method of questioning (Freydberg, 1997). As we will argue below, conceptualizing serious play as a practice, allows us to identify a variety of organization development activities as serious play, as well as to understand more about the nature of, and organizational outcomes associated with, serious play. Such a conceptualization allows us to have a more grounded perspective on questions such as the following.

Are there any general rules or principles that govern serious play, constraining behavior in certain respects, yet enabling desirable outcomes to emerge in other respects by design? If such rules or principles should exist, then how exactly might they be applied in practice, as an aid to the facilitation of serious play in organizational contexts? Can people play seriously with spreadsheets at a boardroom table in an office building? Conversely, can people be bored with Lego bricks, or use them instrumentally in ways that are anything but fun to achieve work objectives? When is one playing seriously, and when not? Can serious play occur spontaneously or does it need to be designed and facilitated?

More broadly, what is the difference, if any, between the forms of activity described in the serious play research literature and the range of well-known OD processes? For example, can the technologies initially practiced at the National Training Laboratories founded in 1947 in Bethel, Maine (Greiner & Cummings, 2004) and then spread throughout the world be considered serious play? To be sure, early processes such as T-Group (Argyris, 1964; Kuriloff & Atkins, 1966), self-directed group (Solomon, Berzon & Davis, 1970), and team-building (Crockett, 1970) interventions had serious goals such as resolving interpersonal tensions and enhancing personal growth and organizational functioning. And yet many times these processes incorporated or were practiced alongside experiential methods that included playful techniques that were intended to provide substantive learning experiences for group members relating to issues such as group dynamics and interpersonal trust.

For example, the Kolb Team Learning Experience approach (Kayes, Kayes, & Kolb, 2005) begins with an exercise called "crazy coffee beanery," which invites participants to create and market as a group a new coffee flavor. Subsequent developments include the conference model, building on sociotechnical systems theory to engage a large number of organizational members in change efforts in an effective manner (Axelrod, 1992), scenario planning, aiming to engage stakeholders in strategic thinking processes (Shoemaker, 1995), and outbound experiences aimed to bridge the gap between knowledge and application of concepts (Meyer, 2003). Can such activities be considered as forms of serious play?

Moreover, even though the field of OD has evolved in ways that differ from and even reject the traditional ideology and values referenced above (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Greiner & Cummings, 2004), the employment of playful activities as means to

achieve "serious" outcomes remains widespread, offering ways to engage actors and generate rich, multimodal data and modes of interaction. Indeed, recent contributions to the field suggest that additional modalities of expression and interaction that extend beyond exclusively cognitive or linguistic dimensions are likely to help the cause of the overall OD process as well as the specific goals of an intervention. Outdoor exercises (Meyer, 2003) or corporate theatre (Clark and Mangham, 2004), for instance, require participants' corporeal involvement to be effective. Similarly, analogically mediated inquiry (Meisiek & Barry, 2007), arts-based methods (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009), or cognitive sculpting (Sims & Doyle, 2002) involve participants in producing artifacts with various materials. These exemplary interventions all involve some sort of projective technique, and they appear to use playful interactions with the body or some material to develop the individual, the team, or the organization. Can they all be considered as forms of serious play?

In response to open questions such as these, and in recognition of the inherent ontological ambiguity as well as the multiple potential outcomes associated more generally with the phenomenon of play, we now turn to reframe serious play as a specific form of practice that involves sustaining a paradox of intentionality. By introducing a theoretically grounded notion of practice, we seek to offer a semiotically coherent definition that (a) encompasses the cognitive, social, emotional, and embodied elements addressed in previous research and (b) provides practitioners with clear guidance regarding how to frame, design, and engage in seriously playful processes. Since we approach serious play as a practice, our answer to many of the above questions is affirmative. That is, a variety of organization development activities can be seen as serious play as long as they involve the paradox of intentionality we described above. The existence of this paradox allows us to understand when serious play takes place, whether or not the activity is described as such. Furthermore, a view of serious play as a practice allows us to design interventions that elicit and cultivate it, as well as identify outcomes of this practice at the individual and group levels that in turn contribute to organization-level outcomes.

Reframing Serious Play as a Practice of Paradox
Introducing the Concept of Practice

Although we do not dispute the inherent, ontological ambiguity associated with the term *play*, we believe that it is legitimate to seek to tame this ambiguity through definition in order to fulfill specific, pragmatic purposes as practitioners or as scholars. Toward that end, we recall how social theorists have in recent years increasingly used the term *practice* in a technical sense to describe meaningful human action that is recurring and patterned within certain contexts. The ontology and epistemology of practice have been approached from a variety of distinct philosophical perspectives, especially following foundational thinkers such as Bourdieu (1990), Heidegger, and Foucault. In view of this diverse and often contentious literature, we define practice

following Schatzki et al. (2001) in terms of "embodied, materially mediated activities that involve a sense of shared understanding that has explicit as well as tacit dimensions" (p. 2). We have adopted this definition of practice because it encompasses the range of different contextual and process elements as well as outcomes identified by the existing serious play research, and thereby provides a way to integrate the divergent connotations into a more robust theoretical framework. Conceptualized as a practice, the term *serious play* can be used empirically to describe with greater precision and comprehension not only the contexts, process characteristics, and outcomes already associated with serious play but also a range of activities (including OD process techniques) that have not previously been described in that way.

We noted above that the existing serious play literature has raised a series of open questions about the relationships between a range of apparently divergent phenomena. These phenomena can be integrated by reframing serious play from the perspective of practice theory (Schatzki et al., 2001). If we assume a practice ontology of meaningful human action, then the cognitive, social, emotional, and embodied dimensions identified by previous research appear as interrelated facets of a single, albeit complex phenomenon. The concept of practice includes each of these dimensions and levels of analysis, providing a semiotic framework in which to integrate the apparently divergent elements identified in the existing serious play research. Moreover, practice theory assumes that the meaning associated with particular actions is dynamic, remaining always contingent on the actors who engage in them. In this sense, the concept of practice allows organizational researchers to account for the adaptive potential associated with play, identifying outcomes as they emerge in specific organizational contexts.

Working with a practice theory of serious play, organizational researchers can approach a wide range of process elements (such as the medium of communication, the material setting, or the organizational context), investigating them not as discreet, independent aspects, but as interdependent aspects of an integrated practice. Similarly, organizational researchers can approach a range of potential outcomes (including cognitive insights, social relationships, affective dynamics, and embodied perceptions), investigating them not as discreet, causal effects, but as emergent properties of a dynamic, evolving human practice. We argue below that however these various process elements and outcomes may be configured in concrete organizational situations, the activity can be theoretically described as a practice of serious play so long as people sustain a paradox of intentionality.

The Paradox of Intentionality

In view of the various organizational contexts as well as desired or emergent process outcomes identified in the existing literature, we suggest that from a practice perspective a central element of serious play is the paradox of intentionality. As noted above, ambiguity and paradox have been consistently associated with play. Most generally, the ambiguity of play appears to provide people with a frame within which to exercise the imagination and express new possibilities for action (Sutton-Smith, 1997). The

concept of serious play expresses this ambiguous or paradoxical character explicitly, by juxtaposing the frivolity associated with play with the seriousness associated with work. Having reframed serious play as a practice above, we are now in a position to provide a more precise account of how people in organizations can enact this ambiguity as a paradox of intentionality.

As Poole and van de Ven (1989) noted, *paradox* as a term involves several layers of meaning. In one sense, broadly employed by academics as well as laypeople, a paradox is a puzzling feature of life that involves seemingly incompatible features or perspectives. Such paradoxes are socially constructed, aided by individuals' tendencies to interpret reality through bipolar concepts, and the tendency of linguistic labels to ascribe things into distinct categories (Lewis, 2000). Second, in a rhetorical sense, a paradox is a trope involving the juxtaposition of two incompatible and oppositional theses, used to persuade the audience of a certain point of view. Third, in formal logic and mathematics, a paradox consists of contradictory propositions that are true and arrived at by sound arguments, but when brought together there is an absurd outcome, for example, in the case of certain mathematical proofs (Kasner & Newman, 1940).

Some of the most fundamental debates in organization theory focus on apparent paradoxes. These include the action/structure debate (i.e., considering how action can at the same time be both purposive as well as structurally determined), and the stability/change debate (i.e., considering how organizations can be characterized by continuous change yet exhibit high levels of stability over time; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Poole & van de Ven, 1989; Seo, Barrett, & Bartunek, 2004). The strategies proposed for dealing with paradoxes such as these have been summarized by Lewis (2000) as acceptance (i.e., learning to live with paradox and employing the tensions involved as an opportunity for theory building), confrontation (i.e., explicitly addressing the contradictions involved through dialectical thinking), and transcendence (i.e., thinking paradoxically by challenging basic assumptions and reframing situations so that the paradox is transcended).

In common with other fundamental organization theory paradoxes (Poole & van de Ven, 1989), the concept of serious play is neither a logical nor a rhetorical paradox, but a socially constructed one, dependent on a bipolar formulation of two apparently contradictory modes of intentionality—one that engages in autotelic behavior that has no purpose (i.e., play) and another that frames this behavior in the context of telic, purposive, goal-oriented (i.e., serious) organizational life. We adopt the strategy of acceptance (Lewis, 2000; Poole & van de Ven, 1989) and seek to treat this socially constructed paradox as an opportunity for theory development. The primary theoretical contribution of this article is to address the semiotic ambiguity of the existing literature by framing serious play as a practice in and through which people deliberately and reflectively sustain a socially constructed paradox of intentionality. In other words, the practice of serious play occurs whenever people in organizations engage in autotelic activities intentionally to achieve some desired outcome. The practice can involve a range of different process components, and it can be associated with a variety of process outcomes, so long as the paradox of intentionality is sustained. This

theoretical contribution allows us to reflect more precisely on the ways in which organizational actors can design, facilitate, and sustain the practice, or not, by selecting specific process components and articulating possible process outcomes. In this sense, the reframing of serious play as a practice of paradox also makes the theory considerably more useful to practitioners.

The Paradox of Intentionality Can Be Constrained or Enabled by Other Dimensions of Practice

As noted above, when people play they are motivated intrinsically by the fun or enjoyment associated with the activity itself. To the extent that they deliberately use that enjoyment as a means to some other end, they risk diminishing the fun, rendering the practice more serious and less playful. Jacobs and Statler (2005) have described serious play in the context of scenario planning in terms of creating the conditions for the possibility of emergence, where the intention is to produce some consequence, but the nature of the consequence as well as the level or context within which it occurs remain unknown. By describing serious play as a practice of paradox, we can more precisely describe how people can sustain the contradiction of these socially constructed objectives. The seriousness of the intention to produce a positive outcome can, at any juncture, overwhelm and foreclose on the intrinsically motivated "play"—but in turn, the playfulness and lack of determinate objective can destabilize existing patterns of behavior as well as trigger the emergence of new patterns of behavior that were not intended by the organizational actors themselves. This ambiguity is only compounded because of the variety of process characteristics and outcome variables that can be integrated into the practice, depending on the organizational context, participants, objectives, and so on. In Aristotle's (1962) succinct phrase, at a certain point in the paradoxical practice of serious play, "the rule of the undetermined is itself undetermined" (NE 1137b29-30).

Within this ambiguity, however, hides the potential for emergent outcomes. Perhaps because of the monotony associated with industrial and bureaucratic organizations, there are many different ways to shift the cognitive, social, emotional, and embodied dimensions of experience sufficiently to generate autotelic enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. Again, the definitive element of serious play practice is not the specific material circumstances associated with it, or the outcomes associated with it, but instead the extent to which participants are frivolously having fun as an instrumental means of achieving serious productive objectives, and thereby enacting a paradox of intentionality.

In this light, specific context, process, and outcome factors may provide intrinsic motivation in certain concrete organizational circumstances, but they may inhibit it in others. Phrased in pragmatic terms, many different aspects of OD processes may be deliberately manipulated to intensify the paradox of intentionality. At a very basic level, people may go to an off-site retreat center and gather around a conference table with their colleagues, and the simple change of venue may disrupt the tedium associated

with the office and make the interactions seem more fun. But then, if the organizational actors are invited to engage in embodied activities that are in some sense similar, yet in another sense quite different from the embodied activities they regularly engage in together, they may adopt an even more playful attitude. Beyond that, if instead of using their hands to manipulate conventional components of the material environment (e.g., flip charts, computers, presentation slides), they use their hands to manipulate material objects that are not only unfamiliar in that context, but additionally carry a strong association with childlike playfulness (e.g., Lego bricks, clay, paint), the intrinsic motivation may increase. In this sense, OD practitioners can deliberately intensify the paradox of intentionality by stretching the boundaries of what people are familiar and comfortable with. In this regard, it is, however, possible to stretch the boundaries so far that the play frame is broken (Goffman, 1974; Turner, 1974), and people either cease to see any intrinsic value in the activity or become bored, and the process becomes routinized, instrumental production. Experienced facilitators can certainly attest to the fact that if helping groups of managers play with toys is part of your everyday reality, it can quickly become tedious.

In this light, it is important to note that from a practitioner's standpoint the outcomes of serious play practice cannot always necessarily be anticipated or formulated as learning objectives by process designers. Instead, specific exercises or activities may be designed and then facilitated experimentally, as open-ended interventions in organizational dynamics. And then, as the various dimensions of everyday work practice are shifted, an intrinsically motivating activity (such as building things with Lego bricks) can be framed within an activity that is extrinsically motivated (such as a strategy retreat). Participants thus enact and sustain a socially constructed paradox of intentionality—by doing something fun and instrinsically motivating as a means to attain another, extrinsically motivated objective.

By reframing serious play as a practice of paradox, we have developed a descriptive framework that can encompass the various semiotic interpretations of the phenomenon offered by previous researchers, while providing practitioners with a more concrete sense of how it can be enacted in a variety of organizational contexts.

Implications and Conclusion

There are several implications associated with this reframing of serious play as a practice involving a paradox of intentionality. First, it is possible to reconsider a series of more well-known OD techniques in terms of the extent to which they do, or do not involve a practice of paradox, and thereby, to understand more about how they can be used from this perspective to address specific organizational challenges. Second, it is possible to view a range of organizational behaviors that arise more or less spontaneously (i.e., without the deliberate aid of consultants or facilitators) as forms of serious play, and learn how to create the conditions to encourage the spontaneous emergence of serious play. Third, viewing serious play as a practice allows us to contribute to the stream of research that approaches strategy from a practice-based perspective through

a focus on tracing the effects of this practice on individual- and group-level outcomes. Finally, it is possible to focus more precisely on the ethical aspects of the practice of paradox, or how the paradox of intentionality can affect ethical decision making in organizations, in this way offering practitioners a tool that may be used to sensitize organizational participants to the ethical and stakeholder-related aspects of decision making. These implications help bridge the concerns of scholars and practitioners by speaking directly to the concerns of OD practitioners as well as practitioners more broadly, and by advancing the scholarly understanding of the nature, effects, and potentialities of serious play.

Reconsidering OD Techniques in Terms of a Socially Constructed Paradox of Intentionality

The history of the OD field is filled with examples of specific activities that can appropriately be characterized as playful. As noted above, the recent organizational research focused on serious play has not adequately considered this rich history, leaving open a basic question about what is and what is not serious play. Based on the theoretical contribution of this article, the explanatory power of the term *serious play* can be extended to include a wide range of well-known OD techniques—indeed, any specific OD or learning technique may be considered as a practice of serious play so long as the participants sustain a socially constructed paradox of intentionality by engaging in an intrinsically motivating activity to pursue an extrinsically motivated objective. Although paradox has been identified previously as an important component of organizational change and development (e.g., Ford & Backoff, 1988; Sastry, 1997; Weick & Quinn, 1999), one implication of this article is that more attention could be paid at a micro level to the intentionality of the organizational actors who participate in OD processes. Future research could seek to identify the extent to which people engaged in OD processes socially construct contradictory objectives, or experience contradictory motivations; such paradoxes could then be correlated to a range of other process variables and outcomes, including individual-, group-, and firm-level performance. Comparative empirical research could even generate a comprehensive, descriptive typology of seriously playful OD processes, including the experiential targets and organizational tasks that are most commonly used to address. Such an awareness could potentially enable OD practitioners to intentionally and explicitly employ such seriously playful processes to facilitate OD and change outcomes.

Recognizing and Fostering Emergent Serious Play

Even if we can describe many of the OD process techniques outlined above as instances of serious play practice, the existing organizational research may have identified only the tip of the iceberg. What if serious play could occur almost anytime or anywhere in organizations? Are people who are doodling, or surfing the Internet idly, or fiddling with paper clips while struggling with a difficult problem thus also playing seriously?

Of course, people can do almost anything playfully, but organizations are often deliberately (and perhaps justifiably) structured in ways that prevent this from happening. Some organizations with explicitly creative outputs, such as advertising agencies or performing arts centers, may encourage playful engagement in daily affairs, but certainly the vast majority does not. And yet there may be more or less latent traces of the practice of paradox embedded in familiar trappings of organizational life—in office binge drinking rituals, golf outings, team-building retreats, scenario thinking, and so on.

Because the understanding of such practices often remains tacit, it may be quite difficult for organizational researchers to approach them empirically using any methods other than participatory, action research. At a theoretical level, a key challenge for future research is to consider how serious play can and does emerge spontaneously in organizations, whether explicitly in conjunction with some kind of OD intervention or not. Looking at things from a practical, OD or organizational learning perspective, the challenge is to design and frame serious play activities within specific contexts, involving specific process components, and in light of specific desired outcomes in such a way as to invert existing "everyday" dimensions of organizational practice sufficiently to make it fun, and intrinsically motivating for participants. For OD practitioners, therefore, the broader challenge is how to encourage the emergence of serious play so that the paradox of intentionality (i.e., serious outcomes achieved via playful, autotelic processes) can contribute to more creativity and innovation throughout the organization, or to addressing specific organizational challenges.

Understanding the Outcomes of Serious Play at the Individual and Group Levels From a Practice Perspective

This article has another implication for organizational researchers interested more generally in practice. The concept of practice has been addressed by organizational researchers seeking to develop new understanding of a range of empirical phenomena, but it has been embraced perhaps most enthusiastically by strategy researchers focusing on "how skilled and knowledgeable strategic actors constitute and reconstitute a system of shared strategic practice" (Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004, p. 15). Within the strategy-as-practice research, a key challenge involves connecting micro- and meso-level organizational phenomena to the macro level of performance (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003). The practice orientation provides a way to focus on a variety of phenomena at different levels of analysis and at multiple levels of scale.

The theoretical reframing of serious play as a practice of paradox provides a means of responding to a call for the identification of disaggregated outcomes at different levels of analysis (Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007). From a strategic perspective, when organizational actors engage in serious play, the consequence for the firm should not be (and cannot be, given the causal ambiguity of the factors involved) exclusively characterized in terms of firm-level performance outcomes such as competitive advantage or differentiation. Indeed, it would be very difficult if not impossible to isolate the effects of a serious play session on complex constructs with multiple

influences, such as competitive advantage. Instead, outcomes may be identified in terms of factors such as enhanced strategic thinking, motivation, or teamwork effectiveness, at the individual and group levels, possibly linked to organization change in terms of specific organizational attributes. Future empirical research focused on the implications of serious play in organizations might start by framing the unit of analysis in terms of such a range of factors included in a robust theory of practice (Schatzki et al., 2001). If the paradox of intentionality could be empirically associated with specific individual- and group-level outcomes, it would not only contribute a better understanding of the effects of this specific activity at a micro and meso level, but it would also enable practitioners to employ serious play to achieve specific organizational improvements related to their existing challenges.

The Ethical Dimension of Serious Play

Foundational theorists (Huizenga, 1950) have identified play as the crucible of action through which social and cultural institutions such as education, law, and government take shape. There is a well-established pedagogical tradition of approaching play as a method of developing the ethical sensibilities required for leadership: from Plato's selection of music and gymnastics (together with the dialectic) as the pedagogical methods appropriate for philosopher-kings, to the role of the arts and humanities alongside the sciences in the modern university curriculum, to the Rhodes scholar-athlete ideal, and so on. More recently, a "play ethic" (Kane, 2004) has been introduced into the contemporary cultural milieu, and organizational researchers have identified optimal instances of collectively virtuous action (Marotto, Roos, & Victor, 2007). The ethical aspect of serious play has been previously identified (Statler et al., 2009) and characterized in terms of rule following, but we believe that the matter merits much more careful and nuanced consideration.

Indeed, the ancient tradition of developing ethical character through play-based and arts-based methods has not been sufficiently interrogated by organizational theorists. The reframing of serious play as a practice of paradox raises additional questions about how organizational research might theoretically and methodologically address the ethical dimension of play practices in organizations (Carter, Clegg, Kornberger, Laske, & Messner, 2007). We suggest specifically that future research on serious play in organizations might examine how the paradox of intentionality shapes ethical decision-making processes (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005).

For example, the influential person–situation interactionist model of ethical decision making (Trevino, 1986) identifies a series of situational moderators, including immediate job context variables (including reinforcement and other pressures), organizational culture (including normative structure, referent others, and responsibility for consequences), and characteristics of the work (including role taking). If a group of people were engaged in an OD process and deliberately began to sustain a paradox of intentionality, each of these moderating factors might shift. Speculating along these lines, the nature of the reinforcement might be different; the pressure associated with

the instrumental work objective might diminish; the normativity associated with specific, habitual forms of action and discourse might relax; other figures may emerge as meaningful referents; people might feel less responsibility for the consequences of seemingly frivolous actions; and the roles occupied by specific team members might shift, as certain individuals appear more or less adept at the seriously playful practice. Future research could explore these speculative possibilities and generate empirical data on how the practice of paradox does (or does not) affect ethical decision-making processes.

The paradox of intentionality may additionally have negative connotations, and although serious play may yield beneficial outcomes for organizations, by the same token it may also become a strategic liability even when deployed expertly among well-intentioned participants. For example, given the opportunity in an organizational change process to imagine and express alternative possibilities for action, people may decide that the organizational objectives framing the serious play are simply not worth pursuing any further, and that resistance or sabotage is appropriate under the circumstances. In this light, there is an additional open question for future research regarding the extent to which serious play practices that provide participants with an occasion to develop the habits of mind and body associated with virtuous, rather than vicious, action.

In any case, gaining a better understanding of the ethical aspects of serious play would contribute to academic concerns with incorporating a new methodological approach to understanding ethical issues in organizations. Importantly, it would also contribute to practitioner and policy maker concerns with fostering organizations that take account not just of shareholder concerns but of the broader body of organizational stakeholders (Lan & Heracleous, 2010).

In conclusion, we have presented serious play as a practice that is characterized by the paradox of intentionality, whereby people engage in autotelic, playful activities deliberately to achieve emergent outcomes that have serious consequences for the organization. We have shown how reframing serious play as a practice can create robust linkages between the concerns of scholars (understanding various aspects of social systems) and practitioners (achieving specific outcomes).

The notion of serious play as a practice of paradox exemplifies how bridges between scholars and practitioners can be built, and in this sense can point the way ahead for a similar framing of a variety of other conceptual domains (such as the emergent domain of strategy as practice). Serious play processes commonly take place in the context of organization development efforts, and thus they appear to align well with the basic philosophy of OD, which holds that when attention is paid to how concepts are enacted through practice, the interests of knowledge development as well as organizational functioning can simultaneously be served.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. See www.etymoline.com.
2. See www.seriousplay.com.

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