

# THE NEW DIALECTIC OF PLAY

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Games, like institutions, are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism.

-- MARSHALL McLUHAN

In Douglas Rushkoff's recent work one frequently meets the implicit hope that juvenile videogame players, when they come of age, will assume a different attitude toward many things the previous generation accepted as given and never bothered to question as to their social legitimacy. It is thus hoped that this generation of joystick capitalists and social hackers, having learnt from game-playing to look for way-outs and parallel or alternative solutions where none seemed to exist, will search for and discover new ways to incubate a mass culture of curiosity in which tinkering with the underpinning principles of political, social, and economic organisation is massively encouraged<sup>1</sup>. But this optimistic voice has been heard before. From Johan Huizinga's

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<sup>1</sup> Rushkoff, Douglas. 2004. *Open Source Democracy*. Demos, at

and Marshall Sahlins's belief in the innate capacity and desire of human beings to organise and structure life around play and playfulness<sup>2</sup> to the protean consciousness proposed by Robert Lifton as a coping mechanism structured around the many personas and avatars that nowadays younger people 'dress themselves with' in order to accommodate the demands being placed upon them in a time where one is always-on and always-connected to different communities, play has been offered as the only fix capable of injecting some vital versatility, harmony, and equilibrium into our turbulent, laden with anxiety, overburdened lives<sup>3</sup>. However, this hope for liberation and harmony through play is not only limited to the scope of one's free time, but it extends well beyond it to the work shift.

I have come across a good many Web developer saying half-jokingly that developing a Website is half real work and half play<sup>4</sup>. Or half art, half work, whatever. But if play and fun consists in spouting out, churning out line after line, frame after frame, template after template, Website after Website, hour after hour, day after day, and weeks go by, then I am sorry but I cannot see how this can be much of a funny or empowering line of work. Yes, there are Web developers on the payroll of creative agencies whose work content is nothing but creative. Developing ten nearly identical Websites per day can be seen as a creative thing to do only in a very twisted, pathetic, and ironic way. Developing a Website for oneself, as a personal project kind of, with no employment contract involved, could be fun, I suppose. So, too, would being a Web developer with CICV<sup>5</sup>, working inside a refurbished old castle in rural France, on a project commissioned by a commercial organisation which is demanding nothing less and nothing more than an innovative Website, no strings attached, under the spiritual leadership of a world renowned digital art connoisseur like Bongiovanni. At CICV, whose raison d'etre is to explore and accelerate the convergence of creative art and digital lifeforms, work consists in researching, and research consists in working. And both should be geared at exploring new ground, doing something that has not been done before, building technology artifacts that none has dared to build before. But there are no job definitions at CICV. Everyone working there is an artist. Dreams and fantasy worlds, like the CICV universe, do indeed exist in real life. And real

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<http://www.rushkoff.com/downloads/opensource democracy.pdf>

- 2 Sahlins, Marshall. 2003. *Stone-Age Economics*. Routledge; Huizinga, Johan. 1971. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Beacon Press.
- 3 Lifton, Robert J. 1993. *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. NY: Basic Books.
- 4 Characteristically, in a *Hotwired* interview in 1998, Gregor Rothfuss, a Web developer who sits at the board of the OSCOM (central organisational for Open Source Content Management), when asked what he liked the most about the Net, he replied: "The very fine borders between serious work and play when you design a Web site". <http://hotwired.wired.com/members/98/05/geek0a.html>
- 5 URI: <http://www.cicv.fr/>

people are being paid real money to work (or play) there. But unfortunately dreams and fantasy worlds do not last forever. CICV has recently bitten the dust, a deceased research centre, once buzzing and steaming with life, now left to decay<sup>6</sup>. What is the moral of this story? Maybe the death of CICV will serve as a symbolic death, a symbolic manifestation of the practicalities (or contradictions) inscribed in the daily practice of coding for a living. Waged Web developers can hardly be “artists”. Or anyway most of the times when they choose to function as artists, they cannot expect to be making a decent wage. Choose your life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a mortgage payment. Or choose art and autonomy instead. But if that is what you choose, then you might as well have known better. For real art and autonomy, that is, of the complete and absolute kind (which, said otherwise, is not reducible to the product of one's labour, but, rather, can only have a meaning in the context of the way one leads his or her whole life), have little to do with commodified work (in fact, they have nothing to do with any kind of work, since work, if conceived in its purest form, consists in the artificial and forced rotation of life about the dual axis of production-consumption).

And despite all this, the search for inner meaning through play and playfulness is alive and kicking wherever one turns to. The hope is still kept alive. Increasingly, in the business and management literature, employees are being portrayed as soccer players, and managers are being re-conceptualised as coaches. The market, once referred to as the battlefield, is now understood through images of green football fields<sup>7</sup>. Weird? Interesting? Perhaps. Nowadays, businesses reinvent themselves and their work environments to become more pleasant to their players. Kodak, in Rochester, New York, has a 'humor room' packed with toys, videos, and all sorts of games to keep its players well entertained<sup>8</sup>. Such stories abound. And every single one of them points to one direction: commercial entities, if they wish to remain alive in today's ultra-volatile environment by attracting and retaining the human capital required to make this wish come true, should reinvent themselves and work inside them along the lines of play and art. The title of Joseph Pine's and James Gilmore's hugely influential business book *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* speaks for itself. Pine and Gilmore advocate that corporations should be run like theatrical performances, with scriptwriters, directors, producers, and performers substituting for workers, managers, planners, and shareholders. The new concept of work is defined

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6 See Rivoire, Annick. “Art Digital: le CICV effacé du disque dur”, *Libération*, July, 22, 2004. <http://www.liberation.fr/page.php?Article=225391>

7 Nonaka, Ikujiro. 2001. Synthesizing Capability: A Key to Create a New Reality, September 11, at <http://itmnet.cba.hawaii.edu:82/Nonaka.ppt>

8 Kao, John. *Jamming: the Art and Discipline of Business Creativity*. NY: Harper-Collins, 1996, pp.66-67.

through shiny stories and glossy metaphors made to fit with the post-industrial reality in which every business, if it is to survive, ought to be run like a showbiz<sup>9</sup>. And plenty of management academics and superstar consultants, from Malone and Laubacher<sup>10</sup>, Kao<sup>11</sup>, Powell<sup>12</sup>, and Evans and Wurster<sup>13</sup> to Joel Kotkin<sup>14</sup>, are telling us that Hollywood is now the defacto organisational model for running a business the right way. Even Andy Grove, former chairman of Intel, has likened the modus operandi of the software industry to the way theatrical and Hollywood productions are being put together<sup>15</sup>. But make no mistake, the hollywoodisation of business and the alleged reinvention of work around theatre and play is often misleading for it represents only one side of the coin that knowledge workers are tossing, unaware of the darker side that hides beneath.

Had he been alive to witness all this, Herbert Marcuse would have shot himself in the face. What once Marcuse defined as antithetical to work and productivity<sup>16</sup> is now being taken for a spin by the cultural-industrial complex, albeit in a twisted form, ending up reinvented as the basis for the operationalisation of cognitive-informational capitalism, serving as the ultimate rationalisation of the spectacle to the extent that play becomes indistinguishable from work. Though this claim may sound exaggerated at first – indeed, how on earth could authentic play be considered work? - suffice to say that reality-shows, which are nothing but media-mediated dialy routines in which the theatre of the absurd takes on a push-button dimension with the addition of faceless spectators who vote electronically for the direction of the show (*ie.* evicting players out of the game, rewarding players), pay people to play. In the world of reality-TV game shows, players are workers, and vice versa. The day when even a claim as exaggerated as this one may seem now will be obvious is not far. A new reality-TV game show, *Human Resources*<sup>17</sup>, is designed around the concept that players compete against one another for the 'privilege' to work. As expected, the game

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9 See Peters, Tom. 1994. *Liberation Management*. Pan.

10 Laubacher, Robert J. and Malone, Thomas W. 1998. The Dawn of the E-lance Economy, *Harvard Business Review*, September.

11 Kao 1996.

12 Powel, Walter W. Neither Market Nor Hierarchy: Network Forms of Organization, *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, 12 (1990): 296-326

13 Evans, Philips and Wurster, Thomas. 1999. *Blown to Bits: how the new economics of information transforms strategy*. Harvard Business School Press.

14 Kotkin, Joel and Friedman, David. "Why Every Business Will Be Like Show Business", *Inc.*, March 1995, p.66.

15 Cited in Owen, Geoffrey and Kehoe, Louise. "A Hotbed of High-Tech", *Financial Times*, June 28, 1992.

16 Marcuse, Herbert. 1966. *Eros and Civilization: A philosophical inquiry into Freud*. Beacon Press, and at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/marcuse/works/eros-civilisation/index.htm>

17 See Lachnit, Carroll. 2002. Playing the HR game - Between The Lines - Human Resources - Television Program Review, November, at [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0FXS/is\\_11\\_81/ai\\_94638421/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FXS/is_11_81/ai_94638421/print) .

show has received fierce criticism, especially from left-wing cultural critics and political parties. But that is hardly important. What is more important is that industrial-age definitions of play and work no longer apply to the contemporary game. Now, stripped off of their original meaning, work and play (or the juncture of work and play) are satisfying the requirements of the spectacle for the establishment of a media-hypertrophic situation in which the labourers involved in immaterial production cannot tell with any degree of certainty whether they are working or playing. In fact, for most of them, this question is entirely devoid of any meaning: play has lost the erotic scent it once afforded, and its hedonistic dimension has been incorporated in a trap designed for the mind. Now, the project of work is no longer threatened by sexuality and playfulness: workers are encouraged to indulge in any act of sex and play they wish as long as they do it inside the office, and return back to their work routines with reinvigorated enthusiasm. Contrast the historical development: in Stalinist Russia factory workers were prohibited from putting their hands in their pockets, so that they would not even think of masturbating, whereas, by contrast, in reality game shows workers-players are prohibited from leading an austere life. Game over is now an oxymoron.

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### **Publication notes.**

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### **About the author.**

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