



## Dialoguing Play

Pat Kane

In discussion with Steve Linstead and Rob McMurray. With additional questions by Andy McColl, Sebastian Bos and Ed Wray-Bliss.

### abstract

In 2004, Pat Kane published *The Play Ethic: A Manifesto for a Different Way of Living* (Macmillan), which went into mass-market paperback in September 2005. Pat's commitment to bridging boundaries between the arts, sciences and social sciences to open up new possibilities for working, living and creating futures together struck a chord with the Department of Management Studies at the University of York, who appointed him Visiting Fellow in 2005. To inaugurate the appointment, on October 5<sup>th</sup> 2005 Pat presented a 90 minute overview of the ideas in the book, followed by a 90 minute seminar discussion. The questions and responses taken from the discussion were edited, reworked and updated by Pat (in between writing and recording a new *Hue and Cry* album) and the resulting text is presented here.

*Rob McMurray:* Before I start, I'd just like to thank Pat for presenting his ideas in *The Play Ethic* and make the point that for me the book's great strength is its commitment to bringing together sharp observation of contemporary socio-economic-cultural phenomena and new developments in science with a sustained and wide ranging effort to respect theory and ground its deliberations in philosophical reflection that has been historically worked through from classical formulations to current cutting edge challenges.

*Steve Linstead:* I'd like to echo that. I think it is this respect for scholarship, rather than just empiricism or method, that differentiates this book from so many others that will populate the bookstores of airport terminals – Gibson Burrell's 'Heathrow Organization Theory' – and gives us valuable material to work with and from as it challenges us to develop a new and meaningful approach across the social sciences. It's an important project and it will mean that the book continues to be discussed, seriously, for some time to come – which is what it merits and why the University of York's Department of Management Studies are happy to welcome Pat and his vision.

My first question, Pat is one about point of view. It's a common assumption that play is a luxury, something we can do when we can afford the time, the toys, the tools and technology or the investment in skill or sociability required. Accordingly, reflecting on play and adopting a subject position that allows us to read, narrate or even author the world in terms of play implies a degree of privilege – perhaps a Western, middle-class

perspective. The question then is ... can play be relevant at all to child labour in 3<sup>rd</sup> world sweatshops, those dying of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, the victims of 4<sup>th</sup> world famine, the global underclasses identified by Bauman and Castells that appear to be the necessary fallout of capitalism, those oppressed not just by totalitarianism but by the everyday terror of genocide?

*Pat Kane:* For me, it's very important that before we begin to situate play's 'relevance' to a range of pressing political and economic issues, we examine some of those 'common assumptions' about play. For one thing, play conceived as a 'luxury' needs to be related more deeply to its socio-biological function. The greatest contemporary scholar of play, Brian Sutton-Smith, notes (in *The Ambiguity of Play*) that the purpose of play for advanced mammals is as a form of 'adaptive potentiation' – that is, as a generator of possible worlds and actions within defined times and places, an activity that helps the organism prepare and rehearse itself for the dense and manifold interactions of the wider social environment. So in a sense, play's luxury is our literal birth-right, by virtue of the developmental role that it has not only in our childhoods, but (increasingly today) in our post-patriarchal, post-bureaucratic forms of adulthood too. The 'privilege' of play, from this perspective, is the right to continue that balance between sufficient material security, and self-chosen risk and experiment, that characterises the development process of childhood.

My argument in *The Play Ethic*, however, is that this continuance of a playful spirit and mentality in our lives isn't just about a kind of internal recovery of 'childness' (the gambit of many New-Age oriented advisers and consultants in the world of organizational reform and change), but requires a political take on how the supporting conditions for human play can be politically and institutionally secured. In short, we are both players in the playground, and conscious designers and facilitators of the playground. Now, in the richer parts of the world, my call for us to be 'active players' in our societies and economies undoubtedly benefits from post-scarcity, affluence and the excess capacity of techno-culture – we have the means, tools, times and places to be players. To me, the essence of a play-ethical perspective is to keep asking, 'who gets to play? What does it mean to play? Who does it benefit and harm?' I'll develop this later, but my hope for a rich discussion about the nature of play in Western societies is that it gets us to reckon with the civic responsibilities that come with our semiotic and communicational freedoms. If we have that privileged moment of autonomy, self-realisation and self-awareness called play in our developed-world lives, what are we doing with it? How are we using its 'world-imagining' potentials to shift towards a less unjust and exploitative world?

*SL:* Partly what you're saying is that play is ontological, and that it unites mammals as simply engaged with reality as Gregory Bateson's otters and reflexively critical about how that reality is represented as Jacques Derrida. Our question then becomes: how do socio-political conditions distort its forms and possibilities? Is play a potential source of emancipation, of resistance, of stimulating human potential and bridging the ontical and the metaphysical – and if it is how best can we possibly attempt that?

*PK:* I think the ontological nature of play is fascinating, but in no way automatically implies an emancipatory potential. Recently, I've been interested in the use of ludic and

playful language in military and diplomatic discourse. There is a long and enduring tradition within military elites of using simulation and game-based strategy – from the Chinese and Indian precursors of chess in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, to the Bush cabal and their ‘game-changing’ rhetoric in the middle-East.<sup>1</sup> The Pentagon ‘adaptively potentiates’ its manoeuvres in the ‘war on terror’, deploying a whole raft of strategies that partake of various modalities of play – including game theory (as a rationale for pre-emptive strikes), multi-user networks coordinating troop activity (these explicitly modelled on computer game culture). The simulatory moment of play is needed in all these activities – that suspension of reality, of ‘taking reality lightly’ as Schiller put it, which enables mass destruction and disruption to seem like ‘the great game’ of global war. Yet it strikes me that the response to this cannot be an anti-ludicism – some reassertion of solidity against fluidity, or even of solidarity against networks. We need to think our way through a possible ‘play ethics’ in order that we can identify what the emergent ‘counter-game’ against the top-down games of imperial power might be. The societal ontology of play is, to me, very well explained by the slogan given by Hardt and Negri in *Empire* – that is, ‘there is no outside’. We are in an agonistic world composed of ‘networks of networks’, a planetary ground of play and interaction, where the means of counter-organization are entirely within our grasp. The political priority is inventiveness, initiative and energy in the face of this global-societal field – enacted by a growing mass of self-conscious political players, who wish to use this systemic instability to create their own counter-publics and even counter-realities. We are already at play and in play – our emancipation depends on our activism. I’m beginning to realise that the tradition of agonistic political philosophy refined by Foucault, Laclau, Deleuze and Guattari is very congenial to a play-ethic perspective.

*RM*: Could [I] come in here and I press you then to be a bit more specific on how do we enable those at the bottom of the corporate ladder to realise their capacities and selves through play? Even in organizations that are creating the new play commons (such as the BBC) there are armies of cleaners, often immigrants, whose lives are not in-play when it comes to organizational and wider life except in the sense that they are subject to the fates of commercial gods. They are un-empowered and may be working for a subsistence wage. In the absence of an immediate economic or technological revolution what can a play ethic offer them?

*PK*: Glad to get back to organizations! To begin with, I’m pretty traditionally left-wing when it comes to securing proper wages and conditions for those in service work – the trade unions still have a primary function here, and have to continually evolve their reach in the face of immigrant and part-time labour conditions. (My favourite story of the relationship between playful organizations and service work is that of Las Vegas, one of the most tightly unionised cities in America<sup>2</sup>). But on a wider perspective, I still agree with the post-industrial utopian Andre Gorz when he identified that the central problem of an equitable post-work society is – who does the chores? And I agree that there’s a huge bogusness about places like the BBC whose staff self-consciously pursue a creative, playful ethic, yet leave the Morlocks to come in and clean up after the Eloi’s

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<sup>1</sup> See my article for the Guardian’s *Comment is Free* site, [[http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/pat\\_kane/2006/08/the\\_dangers\\_of\\_gamechanging.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/pat_kane/2006/08/the_dangers_of_gamechanging.html)]

<sup>2</sup> See Marc Cooper’s 2004 article in *The Nation* [<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040524/cooper>].

cavortings.<sup>3</sup> I think the horizon of ‘who gets to play?’ has to be consistently addressed, in every realm, and at every level in an organization: I would go so far as to propose a combination of self-service practices, as part of every employee’s daily duties (it’s an expression of collective care to leave your desk in a state of cleanliness and tidiness), and an agenda for the robotisation of cleaning (nowadays a matter of office design and technical investment, rather than SF fantasy).

These would be practical responses arising from a re-conceptualising of the role of care and service in our entire lives – something I try to address in the book, when talking about the ‘play-care continuum’, a continuum of ‘response-abilities’. I think it is clearly possible to conceive of care and service as a gratifying response to the contingencies of our complex lives – and that there might be those (already well evidenced in the ‘caring’ professions) whose ‘response-abilities’ might be more attuned to the finitude of needs and standards (care), and less attuned to the infinitudes of horizons and possibilities (play). (Though in my view everyone has their own parabola, makes their own shape, around both ends of this continuum). The ‘art of care’ – perhaps better termed the ‘craft of care’ – could possibly be realised for some in the labour market as a positive identity, if we had a collective narrative for ourselves as ‘players and carers’ (rather than ‘workers’ and ‘lifers’).

In this ‘play-care continuum’, the right of creative activity would be balanced by the responsibility of maintaining its conditions of possibility, part of which would involve the inclusion of weaker players and the restoration of fatigued or broken players. The social apartheid implied by the time-poor/money-rich phenomenon can be addressed at root here. In a situation where self-care, mutual care and automated care increases, as an aspect of the social organization of playerhood, the ‘cleaner’ or ‘maintainer’ becomes someone for whom ‘cleaning’ is, in a real sense, a holistic or poietic act (in the way that carpentry, or teaching, has a vocational or self-realising force). I’m aware that this is a highly speculative vision of play and care as a dominant moral continuum in society. However I tend to agree with Frederic Jameson in *The Seeds of Time* that it often seems “easier to imagine the end of the earth and the end of nature than it is to imagine the ends of capitalism”. To imagine a society of players and carers is to think on the other side of currently existing capitalist society.

*SL*: Which then raises the question of subjectivity – the relation of play to self and identity. One of the shadows cast over our modern understanding of the character of the player identity is Kierkegaard’s outline of the aesthetic life as a style of disengagement in part one of *Either/Or*. For Kierkegaard’s Don Juan type of character, the point of the aesthetic life was to refuse all commitment, but also to take no responsibility for that – the triumph of the player gliding through relationships was not simply to seduce, but to then unsex the lover into breaking off the relationship and being happy to do so, so

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3 The Morlocks were a humanoid species of below-ground dwellers, whilst the Eloi lived above ground, in H.G.Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895). The original proletarian Morlocks, who serviced and provided infrastructure for the Eloi, were sinister and cannibalistic, and used the aristocratic, placid and dissolute Eloi as a dietary staple. The terminology has since been widely applied to the distinction between hierarchically divided communities. *Wikipedia* offers a fascinating summary of the post-Wellsian acceptations of the terms, including the *X-Men*, *Doctor Who* and a scooter gang in Berlin. [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/> ; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eloi>]

that the player could slip free without any guilt being attached for the betrayal or break-up. Sartre sought to combat this bad faith through angst, Levinas through reconfiguring alterity, but neither was a player as such. How can we combat or address the power of the received 19<sup>th</sup> century prejudice against play as being superficial and evasive and present a vision of play as a practice of ethically responsible subjects?

*PK*: That's a lovely historical reference. And that characterisation of the feckless, irresponsible player is strongly taken up by Zygmunt Bauman in his books on consumerism. In terms of Sutton-Smith's and others' spectrum of discourses and paradigms generated around the human propensity to 'adaptively potentiate', Kierkegaard's power-player and ego-player (spurning the social and developmental elements of playerhood) is particularly recognisable, and particularly male also. My answer to this prejudice is to emphasize the diversity of purposes and relationships that playful activity can and does encompass – the collectively-affirming identity of play-as-sociality in carnival and ritual, the nurturing and educative power of developmental play, the possibility for projective empathy in play-as-imagination, the sheer surrender of ego and agency involved in the 'play' of fate and the cosmos. In short, you counter Don Juan with Indra's Net, or Shakespeare, or Froebel, or the Notting Hill Carnival. To me, a play 'ethics' is almost – as Bauman says very clearly in *Postmodern Ethics* – the very definition of ethical choice itself. Play is activity that can be characterised as operating at the very extremes of both agency and structure: when faced with this diversity of praxis, we are forced into concrete and urgent arguments about how forms of play might shape and develop the good society or the good person. Not that this is easy to do. My fall back on a workable 'play ethic' is the distinction between finite and infinite games as outlined by the theologian James Carse – corresponding roughly to zero-sum and non-zero-sum games: play aimed at victory, against play aimed at continuing the play, gaining enlightenment from its development and mutation. Don Juan plays for the victory of seduction, which then has to come to terminus, in order that another victory might be secured: a finite player. Perhaps Casanova, or the participants in the Kama Sutra, are infinite players in this respect?

*RM*: I'd like to come in on this question of authenticity if I can. Pat, you talk about authenticity being a construct. You note that once we realise it is a construct we no longer have to be constrained by it. Could not *The Play Ethic* itself be read as a tract on authenticity – albeit fluid and multiple – but a prescription (Pat Kane's prescription?) for authenticity nonetheless?

*PK*: I'm tempted to go along with my Buddhist friends on this one – that is, we live in a state of reality that is in a state of permanent play, mutation and change (identify that at whatever level you wish), but that we can only survive and make sense of this through specific and contingent forms of identity (*samsara* is their term). So yes, the ontological emergence and fluidity that play discloses allows the constructs of authenticity to happen. But yes, fair cop: to be able to intuit, and then live with, change-as-permanence – even in the midst of a samsaric existence – is itself a claim to a deeper 'reality' about our lives. I find the same 'normativity about norm plurality' in Deleuze's writings – asserting strong claims about the processual nature of social reality as against a much stiffer and more authoritarian model, yet never quite aware of (or owning up to) the

progressive nature of this claim. If ‘authenticity’ means ‘being true to the non-dual nature of the universe’, rather than to yourself, then I’ll happily endorse authenticity.

*SL*: Somewhat relatedly to this discussion, a question you yourself initiate in the book is the question of audience, of play as display, and I’d like you to expand on that theme a little if you would. Guy Debord made the situationist position clear in arguing that we live in a society of the spectacle, where Marxist alienation is not merely from the objects of production but from the unfolding of reality itself, from which we are largely unattached and look on. Baudrillard took the point further arguing that we don’t just look on at reality because we cannot know what it is independently of our being in it and acting it out – but such a reality is merely a simulacrum of signs, symbols and information that elicits us to participate in particular ways that realise its illusory aspects. We might be alienated, but we aren’t alienated from anything knowable, and we are engaged in reproducing simulacra. So for Debord spectation is important, and for Baudrillard it is more like spectaction – but the point of both is that we perform, that play is play *for*, that there are audiences even if they are only other players. Perhaps the sort of reality TV that is *Big Brother* captures this simultaneity. But the question is, if play is performance, how do we arrive at an ethics of display? If play is performative, is it just another form of work that takes us back to a modified work ethic?

*PK*: I have been focussed in answering this question by a superb essay from the technology critic Alexander Galloway, ‘*Warcraft and Utopia*’. Let me quote from it:

Adorno argues [in *Aesthetic Theory*] that play activities are forms of repetition, and on this many agree, but he goes further to assert that “in art, play is from the outset disciplinary [and] art allies itself with unfreedom in the specific character of play.” For Adorno, play has been co-opted by the routine of modern life. “The element of repetition in play is the afterimage of unfree labour, just as sports – the dominant extra-aesthetic form of play – is reminiscent of practical activities and continually fulfils the function of habituating people to the demands of praxis, above all by the reactive transformation of physical displeasure into secondary pleasure, without their noticing that the contraband of praxis has slipped into it.” Thus, in the work of Adorno, play is not a vacation from the pressures of production, but rather the form-of-appearance (‘afterimage’) of that mode itself, with repetition, displeasure, and competitive interaction being but symptoms for deeper social processes. [<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=507>]

I agree with Adorno and Galloway that sports is an example of a culture of display, of spectation, smuggling in a ‘modified work ethic’ – particularly in the spectacle of football, where all the tendencies of the new capitalism (disloyal, hyper-individualised employees; performativity as a self-subverting cult; results-driven, visionary management; the tensions of living out and up to a ‘brand’ culture) are served up as daily narrative entertainment for the viewing millions. It’s almost perfectly ideological – the ‘repetition, displeasure and competitive interaction’ of football as the ideal ‘after-image of unfree labour’. Galloway makes the salient point that, in some multi-user online synthetic worlds, the dues and routines that means you ‘stay in the game’ of *World of Warcraft* are almost indistinguishable from the kinds of unfree labour that constitutes an ‘offline’ life. As he puts it, “networks are the establishment and play is work”. Galloway’s other brilliant point is that perhaps we don’t need a labour theory of value, but a play theory of value, given how central play is becoming to information capitalism.

Yet I'd resist the notion – which I think constantly recurs in invocation of play in these kinds of arguments – that play has to be confined to a particular combination of elements in its spectrum. This is how Galloway describes play, as an

irreducible, heterogeneous, unquantifiable, absolutely qualitative human endeavour. Conventionally speaking, play is entirely divorced from any kind of productive activity. Play is defined as a negative force that is often a direct threat to production. Play is leisure; play is the inversion of production. Play is an uncapitalizable segment of time. One may return to Friedrich Schiller on the play-drive: the play-drive is a pure moment, and it is a very necessary moment, Schiller would claim, for man's development, but one that is entirely outside the formal, or the abstract, or all the kinds of human drives that lead to the creation of society as a whole.

What's interesting here is how badly Galloway misrepresents Schiller's play-drive. As Terry Eagleton adroitly points out in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, in the 'Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man', Schiller actually interposes the play-drive as a *hegemonic* term, mediating between the 'form-drive' of rationality, and the 'sense-drive' of irrationality – historicized by Eagleton as Schiller's horrified response, in 1794, to the unholy alliance of the *philosophies* and the mob in the spectacle of the French Revolution. And play as display and performance – the active and shaping 'aesthetic education' that would provide for an integrated model of citizenship and social involvement – was very much Schiller's ideal, what he called the 'aesthetic state'. It's extremely tempting in the age of *Big Brother* to revive Schiller's notion: could the concepts of 'aesthetic' and 'state' ever be brought more appropriately together? And it's an easy step to identify the hegemonic aspects of *Big Brother* as a form of performative play. Just as immaterial labour (in the Italian autonomists' sense) becomes aware of itself as a driving force in the development of society, the spectacle moves into to depoliticize, privatise, and trivialise it. Even more hegemonically, we can see *Big Brother* as orchestrating movements across the dividing line between passive spectation and active participation with consummate ease – a simulation of the opening-up of the spectacle. Slavoj Žižek (1989) has called this 'interpassivity' as opposed to interactivity – a simulation of interaction, guided by existing yet subtle commercial scripts for behaviour.

Is there an irreducibly open, primordial aspect to play, the sheer *difference* celebrated by Derrida, driven by mammalian adaptive potentiation? Yes. And if so, then that provides the 'adjacent possible' within any social system (as the complexity theorists put it) to imagine different forms of display than those which currently canalise the energies of the informational multitude. I'm sure that we'll participate and spectate in some form of 'reality TV' show at some point (Little Brother? Big Sister? Average Activist?) which, as Galloway says, will imagine a life after capitalism "through a utilization of the very essence of capitalism." I have, like Hardt and Negri, a degree of optimism about the mobility of power-flows across a thoroughly networked planet to think that this expressive possibility will be realised, at some point by some group of activists, and create a different form of display that will 'pierce through' the spectacle it participates in. Which leads us to our next question...

SL: ... which is the inevitable one of technology. We are used to the dualism characterised by the sort of technological determinism that disturbed Marx on the one hand, and the utopia of technological possibility that excited the same Marx on the

other, as you note in the book. We have perhaps become used to a more modified prostheticism that sees us extending human capability by means of artificial enhancements rather than by revolution, but such a cyborg vision does raise the question of what it means to be human and whether we are becoming post-human. Social-technological change as studied, for example, by actor-network theorists argues that objects have agency and that humans are part-objects themselves. If we are going to play with technology, are we thereby compelled to play with what it is to be human and non-human? And in working that boundary, is the play ethic a *messy* ethic, as John Law might put it?

*PK:* You're right to suggest that a play perspective brings us quickly to consider the post-human condition. There is no reason why 'adaptive potentiation' as a necessary flexibility, redundancy and excess in the developing mammal, would not begin to include those potentiations that might result from those extraordinary human 'play-tools' of the bio- or neuro-sciences. One of the truly futuristic tendencies in contemporary theory is exactly those post-human networks/rhizomes of affect and movement identified by thinkers like Latour or Deleuze. The mind-wrenching nature of their insights – that there might be lines of change and transformation which pass through machine, human, nature, which may be only retrospectively comprehensible, but which in the meantime liberate us into creative action comfortable with the idea of no predictable outcome – is anticipated by the sheer diversity of definitions of agency and determination represented by 'play' in our cultural archive, and across many cultures. That is – to use Sutton-Smith's typology – play can signify being caught up in agonistic networks, or being surrendered to the inhuman play of the universe, or being involved in the 'technology of improvement' that is education, or entering into a cognitive space both within and without the self known as the 'play of the mind', or even allowing the very integrity of selfhood to be subverted by humour, trickery, idiocy. Or it can be a combination of these rhetorics, and many others. Indeed, as the etymology shows, the root of play in English is *-dleg* from the Indo-European – meaning, literally, movement, motion, energetic engagement. Deleuze's 'line of flight' is very congenial here.

So I'm sympathetic to Law's notion of a social theory that can cope with ontological 'messiness'. My own concern is, precisely in terms of play and the post-human, who assumes the power and vision to create post-human hybrids from the 'mess' of the crucibles of bio-, info- and nano-technology? Our cautionary metaphor in this is always ludic – who has the right to 'play God' with life? Coming out of computer games culture, the answer is 'everybody'. Witness the forthcoming successor to the Sims game, *Spore*, jokingly known as 'Sim Universe', where the player literally evolves an organism from cell, to species, to civilisation, to planetary and then interplanetary expansion. If this habituates a generation of millennials/GenY'ers into believing they have the right to shape and tinker with evolutionary inheritances, then the question is truly open as to what a 'play-with-biology-ethic' might become. The most illuminating debate on this, in my knowledge, is the dispute between Peter Sloterdijk and Jürgen Habermas in 1999 (summarised by Brown at [<http://www.thenewatlantis.com/archive/5/brownannotated.htm>]). It's too involved to go into here, but I think Sloterdijk's request at the end of his essay 'Operable Man' is worth attending to:



How can one repeat the choice of life in an epoch in which the antithesis of life and death has been deconstructed? How could a blessing be conceived that could overcome the simplified confrontation of curse and blessing? How could a new covenant under conditions of complexity be formulated? Such questions as these are inspired by the insight that modern thought begets no ethics as long as its logic and ontology remain obscure. [[http://www.petersloterdijk.net/international/texts/en\\_texts/en\\_texts\\_PS\\_operable\\_man.html](http://www.petersloterdijk.net/international/texts/en_texts/en_texts_PS_operable_man.html)].

I think that a ‘play ethics’ is the appropriate response to a clarified logic and ontology of the present, and is necessary for those ‘conditions of complexity’ that mark the post-human condition. I hope that it follows Sloterdijk’s assumption that the very informational density and complexity of genetic understanding ultimately implies a less violatory attitude towards ‘matter’ and ‘nature’ – no longer ‘raw’ nature, but informational, coded nature, speaking to us of its complexity and emergence. Sloterdijk uses provocative language in this quote, but I agree with his trajectory:

Biotechnologies and nootechnologies nurture by their very nature a subject that is refined, cooperative, and prone to playing with itself. This subject shapes itself through intercourse with complex texts and hypercomplex contexts. Domination must advance towards its very end, because in its rawness it makes itself impossible. In the inter-intelligently condensed net-world, masters and rapists [S’s characterisation of traditional uses of technology by power elites] have hardly any long-term chances of success left, while cooperators, promoters, and enrichers fit into more numerous and more adequate slots.

*SL:* Despite Sloterdijk’s optimism here, and I have some sympathy with it, when we turn more directly to specific organizing and management practices, it is disappointing to find that in the past extremely promising critical analyses have foundered against the problem of changing large organizations – the dominant-hegemonic still seems to be winning out, for the moment at least. Even in flat organizations, perspectives such as feminism and gendered critique have struggled to avoid becoming part of a new discursive regime of more sophisticated exploitation and control as part of what Hardt and Negri and some of the autonomists, as you mentioned earlier, call immaterial labour. As a result it is often argued that approaches based on such critical thinking are only possible in small, organic organizational forms, or slower moving public sector bodies where market pressures are not so powerful as to prevent the occasional eddy forming. Is this true of the play ethic? Can it work in large organizations and the private sector without becoming another fad or fashion to stimulate short-term market creativity?

*PK:* It was something of a revelation to me to read Richard Sennett’s *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, and his useful history of the genesis of the modern organization in Bismarck’s military shaping of German bureaucracy – the human pyramid, in whose divisions of labour many could find their narrow but secure working identity. (Sennett is also clear about the extent to which this was a response to proletarian radicalism at the time – a need to find ‘a job for everyone’.) That legacy explains a lot to me about the recalcitrance of the large organization in the late twentieth century, in the face of critiques from environmentalism, feminism and recently a playful informationalism.

Is that changing? To be sure, and as many in critical management studies have pointed out, the ideology of play is alive and kicking at executive and strategic levels of large organizations, in forms of leadership development, and as a rationale for certain kinds of culture-change programs. Players at this level are ‘game-changers’ who see the

opportunity (often afforded by a pragmatic understanding of complex-systems theory) to change certain ‘iterations’ or ‘narratives’ of occupational practice, in order to foment ‘healthier’ and ‘more generative’ organizational cultures. (These players, of course, have their correlate in militarised organizational forms as well, in terms of strategy and visioning – which I discuss in my previously mentioned article on the *Guardian Comment is Free* site, ‘The Dangers of ‘Game Changing’). The best examples I know of this are IBM’s embrace of the Linux/hacker community, and General Electric’s Ecomagination rebranding – attempts by large organizations to embrace elements of the hacker and environmental counter-cultures, as an act of ‘adaptive potentiation’ to extend their own corporate health and vigour. Though I might agree with Immanuel Wallerstein about this being the Di Lampudesa strategy – everything must change, in order that nothing changes... [see <http://www.binghamton.edu/fbc/iw-vien2.htm>].

I’m a bit sceptical that the play ethic is any more realisable, though, in either more capacious public sector environments, or in ‘more organic’ small-scale enterprises. Certainly the public sector has what I’d call a robust-enough ‘ground of play’, in terms of progressive policies on paternal leave, professional development, flexi-time, etc, to support the ‘multitude of purposes’ in a properly play-oriented organizational culture. Yet despite much rhetoric in recent years about moving away from an overly accountable and auditable management model for public services, in my experience there is little appetite for the kind of playful spaces and practices that might be seen as ‘wasting money in the public purse’ (except for, as mentioned above, the BBC).

I am also sceptical that smaller enterprises with less or no organizational legacy (other than that which their founders bring to them from previous experiences) will fully realise a play ethic on their own either, for precisely the converse reason – that they have no or little ‘ground of play’ that could sustain levels of frenetic ‘start-up’ energy and inventiveness. (Andrew Ross writes about this well in his study of Silicon Alley digital companies in the late 1990s, *No Collar*). I find more promising shifts in political culture – coalescing around the ‘well-being’ and ‘happiness’ agenda, and currently peddled by all three mainstream parties in the UK. This might result in a round of market regulation (specifically, the reduction of overall working hours, social dividend schemes, democratic and equitable parenting rights) which genuinely increases the zones of autonomy and self-determination in British citizens’ lives. With Andre Gorz, I believe that it is only genuine experiences of existential self-determination conducted in free-time and free-space – not the pseudo-experiences provided by much organizational culture – that allows workers to perceive either the alienations of their existing job, or the lineaments of a new and better occupation or practice. I go along with Hardt and Negri at the end of *Empire*, where they conclude that “the generality of biopolitical production” – where every aspect of our lives, communicational as well as physical, is needed by capital – can only be justified if an equally general system of social support is provided – what they call a “social or citizenship wage”.

Players – or what I call in the *Play Ethic* ‘soulitarians’ – are well aware that their effective participation in contemporary capitalism requires their full psycho-somatic commitment. And thus aware, they will struggle to establish non-market spaces wherein that commitment can be measured and mitigated. The question of how soulitarians

become a class *for* themselves, rather than just *in* themselves, is of course key. I concur with Paulo Virno on the difficulties of this:

Contemporary capitalist production mobilizes to its advantage all the attitudes characterizing our species, putting to work life as such. Now, if it is true that post-Fordist production appropriates “life”—that is to say, the totality of specifically human faculties—it is fairly obvious that insubordination against it is going to rest on the same basic datum of fact. To life involved in flexible production is opposed the instance of a “good life.” And the search for a good life is indeed the theme of ethics. (Brown, 2005: 35-36)

Here is at once the difficulty and the extraordinarily interesting challenge. The primacy of ethics is the direct result of the material relations of production. But at first glance this primacy seems to get away from what, all the same, has provoked it. An ethical movement finds it hard to interfere with the way in which surplus value is formed today. The workforce that is at the heart of globalized post-Fordism – precarious, flexible border-workers between employment and unemployment – defends some very general principles related to the ‘human condition’: freedom of language, sharing of that common good that is knowledge, peace, the safeguarding of the natural environment, justice and solidarity, aspiration to a public sphere in which might be valorized the uniqueness and unrepeatability of every single existence. The ethical instance, while taking root in the social working day, flies over it at a great height without altering the relations of force that operate at its interior.

Whoever mistrusts the movement’s ethical attack, rebuking it for disregarding the class struggle against exploitation is wrong. But for symmetrical reasons, they are also wrong who, pleased by this ethical attack, believe that the latter might put aside categories such as “exploitation” and “the class struggle.” In both cases, one lets slip the decisive point: the polemical link between the instance of the “good life” (embodied by Genoa and Porto Alegre) and life put to work (the fulcrum of the post-Fordist enterprise). [<http://info.interactivist.net/print.pl?sid=06/01/17/2225239>]

*SL*: An important theme post-Fordist theme in the book is the developing information age, to borrow Castells’ terminology. I’d like to focus on one aspect of that now. If it is true that new network forms of communication can lead both to new distributed forms of surveillance and control but also to new distributed forms of authority and democracy, how can the play ethic help us to avoid the one and embrace the other as we play across technological forms? And as the role of leadership is going to be significant for managing any transition in formal organizations as we currently know them, does this imply a new style of leadership with a new skill set for which we should be training and developing managers – a sort of open source leadership?

*PK*: I think, to pick up from the previous answer, that a play ethic can help to make that polemical link between ‘the good life’ and ‘life put to work’. That is, the vernacular, quotidian experience of play – as a zone of qualitative autonomy, as Galloway puts it – provides a surfeit of consciousness that can keep networks operating in an expressive, inclusive and open-ended way. Unlike Galloway, I don’t think that, for example, the entire experience of computer-gaming – now a major defining articulation of the Gen Y demographic – is simply a kind of mimicry of unfree labour. There are non-linear, symbolic, exploratory, emergent gaming experiences now appearing – *Spore* is just one, but *Katamari Damancy* might be another – where I’m convinced that a different epistemology is being developed by the user in the game-play. I think the astounding

vigour and variety of current expressions of social software – from blogging to *MySpace* – that arose from the Dot-Bust of the early oughties, and the exponential increase in broadband internet, show that consumer-citizens are demanding to be semiotic and communicational ‘players’, a demand which is clearly driving network development. So the ‘playspace’ of current informational culture is, I think, the crucible for that link between ‘good life’ and ‘life put to work’, between ethics and aspirations and the managerial strictures of the organization /enterprise, to be forged.

As for leadership in this environment, I think the terms ‘followership’ or ‘servant leadership’ – however ghastly their previous uses – may well be coming into their own here. Leaders within organizations who recognise, as Negri puts it, the “production-through-communication” of the multitude (and that section of it which comprises their workforce), are surely compelled to re-examine their strategic and executive function. An ‘open-source’ leadership would be one which, to extend the metaphor, opened out the kernel of its authority to tinkering, adaptation and improvement by an engaged community. The idea of ‘leader-as-narrator/chief-storyteller’ might be an effective realisation of this – someone who listens more to the operational stories of a workforce, than its metrics of performance, as an indicator of the real value of the company, and as a better guide to its strategic direction in the marketplace and society. Yet the skill-set required by that is more akin to the lead conductor in an orchestra (or the lead musician in a rock-group!), or a psychotherapist, or a good story-maker (fictional or journalistic), than to the McKinsey model of system-steering, number-crunching, and corporate-culture managing. The self-proclaimed business revolutionary Ricardo Semler – author of the *Seven-Day Weekend* – would seem to run Semco in this narrative-based mode.

Other than that, I was impressed by the 2003 Demos paper by Paul Skidmore on ‘Leading Between’, a vision for managers in the network age [<http://www.demos.co.uk/files/File/networklogic07skidmore.pdf#search=%22paul%20skidmore%20leading%20between%22>]. Skidmore’s headline recommendations at least hint at the softer, more open imperatives of a manager of players in a productive network, in that “network leaders”: lead from the outside in; mobilise disparate supplies of energy; foster trust and empower others to act; help people grow out of their comfort zones; are lead learners not all-knowers; and nurture other leaders.

*SL*: The point about nurturing recalls your earlier point about the possibility of an ethics of care. You’ve hinted in what you’ve said here that in talking about the work ethic we are in fact invoking a multiplicity of work ethics, and that the play ethic may itself have multiple dimensions. But for the moment I’d like to stick with the opposition implied between the two. In the book you expand a little on the Care ethic, that you see operating more alongside the Play ethic in your own life than the Work ethic. But perhaps it’s my old-fashioned sense of structural equilibrium that suggests that if this is so, with a play-work opposition and a play-care continuum, there must be an antinomial ethic operating to suppress it in the present. What then is the opposite of care? I’d like to suggest that you given us the answer already – some of the other comments you’ve made earlier are actually observations of the existence of a War ethic, one that underpins the idea of legitimate war, that allows allies to invade a country that hasn’t attacked them, and that renders terrorism illegitimate whilst simultaneously rendering pacificism unpatriotic. Of course, such an ethic works hand-in-hand with the

work ethic in the military industrial complex as you've also hinted earlier – and if this is true it both gives us an idea of the size of the task of inaugurating an episteme in which the play and care ethics might have the upper hand, but also underlines the importance of such a project. Would you agree?

*PK:* Absolutely – to underline what I said earlier, I thoroughly agree that the stakes are extremely high, in these militarized times, around the uses and powers of play. If an ontology of play reveals the processual, contestable nature of reality, then to some extent a 'war ethic' – particularly as practised by the current Anglo-American junta – is a move upon the surface of, and exploiting the openness of, the play of reality itself. I am reminded of the quote from the Bush aide in 2004, who claimed that "we are an Empire, and when we act, we create our own reality". This is as monstrously playful as it gets: my Guardian piece above suggests that there are other ways to playfully 'create your own reality', of course, than the exercise of imperial power. At the very least, information about the amoral behaviour of this empire – from Abu Ghraib to Guantanamo, their evidence often gathered and disseminated through new technologies – can still produce visible cracks in the spectacle of its dominance. This is a counter-game, one that is fully enabled by our networked world of bloggers, cameraphoners and activists. It is the more positive side of our unstable and chaotic world order.

Galloway's point in his piece on networks and play, quoted above – that the mobile and mutable power of networks is now an instrument of imperial power, in the form of the Full Spectrum Dominance of the US Military – is well taken. Add to this a developed play consciousness – at least in its agonistic and egoistic modes – and it could easily seem that an anti-play position might easily formulate itself politically. Yet if the terrain of struggle is as immanently networked as Negri and Hardt claim, then it strikes me that the only tools available for counter-power – or at least ones that value a genuine emergent interactivity, as opposed to terrorist or state-terrorist uses of the spectacle to traumatize passive viewers – are those derived from a different part of the play spectrum. And it will be these, rather than some revived-Enlightenment vision of rational will-formation (as in the Habermas model), which rejects the generativity and messiness of informational networks for a kind of transparent, linguistically-Puritan public sphere. As Deleuze and Guattari (1996: 108) say, "we do not lack communication, on the contrary we have too much of it. We lack creation. *We lack resistance to the present.*"

That dangerous power of play – to simulate reality, to take it lightly, to open out a space of potentiation within the very fixity of species-being itself – is an element of that resistance to the present, indeed might well be its necessary psychological and cognitive resource. Yet the point about the 'care' end of the play-care continuum is to create a kind of humanising polarity whereby the sheer responsiveness and febrility of play can be tempered, through a recognition of the costs of play upon those without the strength, energy and resilience to participate in its social forms. My 'play ethic', in any case, tries to establish a continuum between the 'response-abilities' that play and care both draw on – and which means, in essence, an emphasis on social, developmental, imaginative play, a downgrading of agonistic and egoistic play, and a re-inversion of cosmic play: not the Gods of American Empire playing with our reality, but an utterly interdependent

and evolving universe, where creative action has fruitful but unpredictable consequences.

*RM:* If I could back up a little to return to the relationship of the play ethic to that of care, it is certainly one of the most interesting aspects of the book from a social policy perspective, especially with regard to our altered perception of the latter once it is moved from the realms of imposition and work. Specifically, the idea that care may form part of the subjective expression of self in-play offers a very different perspective on the role of the carer and the processes of caring. Yet, as a responsibility (within your own scheme), and thus potentially an imposition, can individual subjectivities be fully at play in most care relationships and processes. I'm think, for example, of: the husband left to care for the partner with dementia, the prison officer for the offender, the parent for the unwanted child, the nurse for the abusive patient...?

*PK:* Again, I'll reiterate that care is as open to contingency and unpredictability as play, if it is done well – that is, if it is truly open in our response-ability to the Other in need. But the carer arrests the *virtuality* of human experience – does not impose the expectations of semiotic freedom, fecundity and expressiveness in the cared-for – and responds to the *actuality* of human need and weakness. Care of course has its own infinitudes of gentleness, incremental improvement, listening to and encouraging narratives of self-determination. I think we're already moving into an era where qualitative human relationships – whether exploited as biopower in the Negrian sense, or not – are becoming the primary act that constitutes society. My hope is that we can reap the benefits of post-scarcity and allow our lives to be composed of reciprocations that can arrange, counterpoint and overlap the modalities of play and care. The further we move from the absurd mechanistics and semi-military structures of the 'working organization' – following schemes of social dividend that decentre institutional work from our lives – the more that we will come to value the act of care for a demented husband, or young miscreant, or angry patient, the in-care child, as yet another form of response ability. Care reminds us of the essential fragility that subtends, and gives dramatic richness to, the life of vigorous, creative, potentiating play. In a strong sense, my play ethic is akin to a communitarianism that recognises the ethical bounties of affluence: the right to play, balanced by the responsibility to care.

*Ed Wray-Bliss:* It seems to me that you are doing something similar with the idea of the 'play ethic' that Marx did with the concept of 'labour'. For instance Marx used 'labour' to signify and celebrate a process where human beings sought to explore their potentiality and creativity, to stretch themselves and make themselves anew. He criticised the alienation of people from this sense of their own potentiality, the way that labour in capitalist organizations became colonised by and limited to the reproduction of capital rather than the creation or realisation of 'self'. And your concept of the play ethic seems to celebrate the same sense of human agency as a celebration and recreation of human potentiality – and this is very welcome. A difference however seems to be that where Marx, by using the concept of labour – a term also rooted in economic or organizational realms – directed his critique at the need to transform capitalist organizations such that all labour could be unalienated, you seem to clearly separate 'play' from 'work' and see them as separate realms. My question is where does this move leave us politically? Is the Play Ethic to be pursued (only) outside of the work

organization context? Does this risk leaving the ‘work’ context unchallenged? And if so – if ‘play’ only happened in the spaces left after ‘work’ – wouldn’t this undermine opportunities for individuals to explore and express their potentiality?

*PK:* I think play is closer to what Marx conceived of as ‘unalienated labour’ than work. Eagleton makes the point in the *Ideology of the Aesthetic* that Schiller’s evocation of the play-drive as a synthesis of form and sense, rationality and irrationality, in an aesthetically-pursued life, actually inspired the young Marx in his theories of alienation – it gave him a sense of the richly realised self that he identified capitalist organization as repressing and preventing. For me, play cultures and practices today are capable (though it’s not inevitable) of giving people that sense of self-possession, and of their activities as acts of *poiesis*, of authored creation, that the Romantic poets and philosophers first evoked in their responses to industrial modernity. But the challenges that these play cultures pose to existing organizational forms, precisely in their formation as sites for the exchange of wage-labour, is profound. Yochai Benkler’s new book *The Wealth of Networks* shows brilliantly that the open networks of the information society are producing a new economic logic of ‘social cooperation’, supplementing those forms of exchange conducted under private-managerial or state-bureaucratic systems of production, distribution and allocation. It’s a matter of record that the pioneers of these forms – the hackers and net-entrepreneurs who enrich the information commons with their social software (open source, blogs, MySpace, online games, friendship networks, etc) – are happiest operating very much outwith the recognisable environs of ‘work’. And the services they offer are intended – in their emphasis on the sharing of culture, music, community – to appeal to those blurred spaces between ‘work’ and ‘leisure’, a kind of general ‘activism’. Play, in its more cooperative and mutualist forms, is very much the sensibility driving these developments. In answer to your question about whether this abandons existing work cultures politically, I feel that there is such a radical re-thinking of our purposive and passional lives implied by the play ethic (and the network society that it seeks to influence and direct), that the best location for an informational politics is not within the workplace per se. Although I don’t share their labour-movement vocabulary of the ‘social factory’, I do agree with the Italian autonomists that it’s the organizations that emerge from the ‘general intellect’, or the ‘multitude producing in its communicational generality’, that are worth the watching. My experiences within existing consulting contexts have made the limits of modernist organizational structures very clear to me!

*Andy McColl:* With apologies, Pat, this is a comment and a two-part question! My questions come from a concern that the ‘play ethic’ may be something that is real for people in the cultural industries, but would have little resonance in many other sectors, and with the real problems of access to ‘play’ in the information age ...

... *PK:* which I share... and I hope that many of my previous answers have pointed towards what I consider to be the high-stakes of a ‘play ethic’ – our need to cope with our capacity to challenge and transcend limits, in areas of war, bioscience and our affective lives.....

... *AM:* ... OK so the first question is.... you claim that the play ethic is realisable in a ‘post-scarcity’ society in which the internet can be seen as an enabling medium.

However, the argument could be made that scarcity was largely overcome with industrialisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it would be more accurate to describe the western industrialised democracies as an example of ‘planned scarcity’ where one’s access to the resources of society is dependent upon where one sits in the socio-economic hierarchy. In this scenario the play ethic in one sense is not generalisable, and the medium of the internet takes on a darker tone as a form of control premised upon old forms of industrial organization – workers, vans and warehouses! How do you overcome these kind of objections?

*PK:* The rise of mass advertising, as a response to stagnating inventories and the need to increase the appetites of a satiated proletariat, has always fascinated me, particularly when I discovered the pivotal role of Edward Bernays, the psychology-practising nephew of Sigmund Freud, in its creation.<sup>4</sup> My point is that post-scarcity is as much about an abundance of subjective as much as objective resources. Indeed, the very crisis of advertising (particularly in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-early 21<sup>st</sup> century) is that it faces a majority population in the richer countries for whom – post-feminism and environmentalism – the claims to a ‘better life through consumption’ is at least open to question from alternative, yet accessible, counter-factual knowledge cultures. The question of socio-economic hierarchy in these conditions – which is more about the acceleration and aggrandisement of knowledge elites, than about the decline or immiseration of those below – is actually directly addressed by forms of play, at least in terms of the ungovernability of younger generations as subjects of labour: those Asbos/workshy/wannabe celebrities, wearing their playful raiment of sports gear and Kappa suits, that raise the ire of the *Daily Mail*. Their evident unwillingness to mount the vans and stock the shelves of the service society, as currently arranged, is to me perfectly understandable – given the sheer utopian splendour that capitalist promotional culture holds out to them, via every screen at their disposal. Young ‘players’ are some of the most self-conscious rebels against the work ethic. Our huge challenge as a society is to respond to the imaginative and passionate deficit revealed by their sheer rejection of the work ethic – a challenge which implies changes in welfare provision, marketplace regulation and public services barely even thinkable at present.

*AM:* The second question isn’t really a question, but you’ve previously made reference to scenario planning as a form of play drawing upon some of the experiences of companies like Shell etc. In fact, scenario planning (as far as I’m aware) developed out of military contingency planning and was later picked up by the oil companies. Given the continuing close relationship between guns and oil as illustrated in the Gulf War, doesn’t this seem to lend further support to your arguments on the crossovers between war and play?

*PK:* Yes, I think it does! Emphatically.

*Sebastian Bos:* I wonder if you could focus on the ethical issues of the play ethic in areas where ethics has perhaps had a higher and more specific profile such as gene-modification and stemcell research, which you mentioned in passing earlier. Do you

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4 A brief summary of Bernays’ contribution and some key references can be found in Linstead et al. (2004: 304-305; 319).



believe that the role of play should be limited in such areas where ethical standards have not yet been agreed on?

*PK:* Sloterdijk's optimism about how the knowledge of the biological complexity of life might engender a different, more benignly playful form of science, is one I share. Of course, he and I could be horribly wrong on this... Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is the downside view on a society in which an ambition to be utterly in control of the bios has disastrous consequences; Iain M Banks' culture novels (e.g. 1992) represent a jollier, more pragmatic upside of society with full nano-and-bio-mastery. I am also in sympathy with the posthuman democratic socialist position of James Hughes in *Citizen Cyborg*.

*SB:* Could I follow up on that, and ask you to be more specific, because many managers of bio-tech companies find themselves operating in different cultural settings with various culturally relative ethical standards. What implications do such variations have for a play ethic?

*PK:* That is a huge question, particularly in spiritual settings like Buddhism and Hinduism, where a post-subjective or post-human universe is presumed. You've identified my next burst of research! This is going to be in the direction of these darker and more demanding aspects of a 'play ethic', so let me take a pause on answering that question till later.

*RM:* Finally, can I take advantage of my position as Chair and steal the last question which I suppose is the big one – how do you prevent the notion of play ethics becoming more than just a potentially lucrative guru fad?

*PK:* I hope by subjecting myself to rigorous symposia like this one!

*RM:* Pat – on behalf of us all can I thank you heartily for that subjection, and say how much we are looking forward to the next such occasion.

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