

# The 'Colors of Play'

Re-thinking Organizations through  
re-cognizing the fluid nature of play

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# Abstract

*“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.”*

(William Shakespeare)

The concept of 'play' has gained prominence in both organizational literature and practice since the cultural turn in the 1980s, in which new configurations of work and 'non-work' to increase business performance were recognized (Kavanagh et al., 2011). However, rather than embracing play's highly ambiguous character, management, and organizational theory, majorly has been limiting their inquiry into play to certain controllable aspects of organization. This misunderstanding has led to prejudice, and today, play is still mainly seen as a mere organizational tool or resource (Miller, 1996; 1997 in Andersen, 2009). We believe this is problematic as organizations thereby will not be open to all the opportunities that play potentially can bring.

In our research, we thus elaborate on the historical relationship of work and play, as we believe that the misunderstanding of play is related to the underlying logic of control, spawned by governmental rationalities that shape the way we work and how organizations function today. We address this problematic by proposing 'Colors of Play', inspired by Huizinga's (1949) claim to grasp play in its 'totality'. These 'colors' allow for conversation and self-contemplation in which readers can mix colors and create their own picture, hence understanding of play as a concept. By applying a narrative approach using Burke's Pentad theory to dissect our four empirical cases, these 'colors' thus serve as a lens to change perspective, whereby we discover how 'balancing openness with dependencies' as a 'new mechanism', challenges the traditional logics of organizations. Furthermore, we uncover that in an organization that is 'at play' it is possible to work seriously unserious, and where effectiveness and what it means to work efficiently can merge. An 'Organization at Play' (Andersen, 2009) thereby consistently allows itself and its players to be subject to constant re-interpretation, which often results in the creation of new meaning.

With this thesis, we, therefore, aim to challenge the conversation about play in organizational theory. Furthermore, we aim to provide direction for organizations to create a space where meaning can be taken apart, reconfigured, and put together differently to solve problems and create new value.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1.</b>	<b>FOREPLAY</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Context	1
1.2	Purpose & Research Question	3
<b>2.</b>	<b>ACT ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW (THE PLAYGROUND)</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1	Playing with Work	5
2.1.1	HISTORY OF WORK	5
2.1.1.1	A Brief Historical Perspective: How Our Understanding of Work Has Developed	5
2.1.1.2	Meaning of Work – Rooted in Ideology & What it Means to be Human	9
2.1.2	SUM UP HISTORY & WORK	14
2.2	Play & Organization	14
2.2.1	DEFINITIONS OF PLAY AND ITS AMBIGUITY	16
2.2.1.1	Further Definitions & the Authenticity of Play	18
2.2.1.2	Critical Voices Towards a Definition of Play	20
2.2.2	PLAY IN ORGANIZATIONS	22
2.2.3	PLAY IN ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY	23
2.2.3.1	The Social Organization	25
2.2.3.2	Brief Discourse: Are Boundaries Between Work & Play Blurring or Not?	29
2.2.4	PLAY IN BUSINESS PRACTICE	30
2.2.5	SUM UP PLAY & ORGANIZATION	31
<b>3.</b>	<b>INTERMEZZO: METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>32</b>
3.1	Research Philosophy – Our Point of View	32
3.2	In Search for an Approach/ Way – Process	34
3.2.1	ACT ONE – Study theoretical background	35
3.2.2	ACT TWO – Analysis & synthesis of literature	36
3.2.3	ACT THREE - Analysis, interpretation & indication of cases	36
3.3	Data Collection	37
3.3.1	SECONDARY DATA – (Literature Research)	37
3.3.1.1	The Two Phases	37
3.3.1.2	Literature Quality	39
3.3.2	PRIMARY DATA – (Case Studies for Indication of ‘Colors of Play’)	39
3.3.2.1	Case Theory – Dramaturgical Analysis with Burke’s Pentad	40
3.3.2.2	Introduction of The Cases	44
3.4	Sum Up Intermezzo: Methodology	45
<b>4.</b>	<b>ACTS TWO &amp; THREE: ANALYSIS</b>	<b>46</b>
4.1	Act Two (Analysis & Synthesis of Literature)	46
4.1.1	THE COLORS OF PLAY (Playing with Theory)	48
4.1.1.1	A World in Its Own	48

4.1.1.2	Meaning .....	50
4.1.1.3	Seriousness .....	51
4.1.1.4	Community .....	52
4.1.1.5	(Love), Empathy & Synchrony .....	54
4.1.1.6	Self-Awareness .....	55
4.1.1.7	Flow .....	56
4.1.1.8	Freedom.....	57
4.1.1.9	Creativity & Imagination .....	58
4.1.1.10	Lostness.....	62
4.1.1.11	Fun & Boredom .....	63
4.1.1.12	Cognitive Aspect of Play .....	65
4.1.1.13	Movement .....	66
4.1.1.14	Order, (Self-Organization) & Aesthetics.....	67
4.1.2	SUM UP ACT TWO.....	68
<b>4.2</b>	<b>ACT THREE (Analysis, Interpretation &amp; Indication).....</b>	<b>69</b>
4.2.1	CASE STORY SerialFund LLC (Type A: Playful behavior expected).....	70
4.2.2	CASE STORY Scrabble LLC (Type B: 'Organization at Play' expected).....	78
4.2.3	CASE STORY Catan LLC (Type B: 'Organization at Play' expected) .....	87
4.2.4	CASE STORY EuroSoft SE (Type C: 'Organization at Play' not expected).....	96
<b>5.</b>	<b>KEY TAKEAWAYS &amp; DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>103</b>
5.1	Balance Openness Through Dependencies .....	103
5.2	Brief Discussion: Effectiveness – Efficiency.....	104
5.3	Working Seriously Un-Serious through Play's Social Colors.....	105
5.4	Play Challenges Control .....	106
5.5	Find Balance through "Dance" .....	106
5.6	Finding Analogies in Theater, Community & Organization.....	107
<b>6.</b>	<b>LIMITATIONS &amp; FUTURE RESEARCH.....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>CLOSING ACT .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>8.</b>	<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>113</b>
	<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>121</b>

# Table of Figures & Tables

FIGURE 1: 1984 APPLE'S MACINTOSH COMMERCIAL (DERNBACH, 2019).....	8
FIGURE 2: RESEARCH PROCESS - OUR WAY, OWN ILLUSTRATION.....	35
FIGURE 3: BURKE'S DRAMATISTIC PENTAD, OWN ILLUSTRATION BASED ON TRACY, 2013, P. 211 .....	42
FIGURE 4: SCRABBLE LLC COMMUNICATING IN-BETWEEN THE ELEMENTS, OWN ILLUSTRATION BASED ON TRACY, 2013, P. 211 .....	85
TABLE 1: MOST USED DEFINITIONS OF PLAY IN ORGANIZATIONAL LITERATURE, OWN ILLUSTRATION ADAPTED FROM PETELCZYC ET AL. (2018). .....	19
TABLE 2: SEMANTIC HISTORY OF PLAY AND ORGANIZATION, OWN ILLUSTRATION ADAPTED FROM ANDERSEN (2009, P. 69) .....	26
TABLE 3: LITERATURE SEARCH: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW PROCESS, OWN ILLUSTRATION.....	38
TABLE 4: LAND RESEARCH CREATIVITY LEVEL, OWN ILLUSTRATION BASED ON LAND & JARMAN, 1993, P. 20.....	61
TABLE 5: PUBLICATIONS UNCOVERED IN OUR PRELIMINARY NARRATIVE REVIEW, OWN ILLUSTRATION .....	121
TABLE 6: SEARCH LOG, OWN ILLUSTRATION .....	124

# 1. Foreplay

## 1.1 Context

Play is a liminal concept that animates life, work, and organization. While play is essential, it also challenges the foundational logic of control on which our organizations and institutions are built. Play is highly ambiguous and has diverse meanings. We may play a game, see a theater play, play an instrument, and engage in sexual play. While these many facets may problematize any discourse about play, this diversity also brings a variety of opportunities. And perhaps especially, in moments of crisis.

Throughout history, there have been pivotal moments — we might call them ‘inflection points’ — in which the future changes direction. The impact of such events has affected the entire world changed the look of our cities, the life of their residents, and the way we structure and organize our societies. As we write this in 2020, the world is yet again witnessing, and living through, another such moment, as life across the globe is set on pause by the COVID-19 pandemic. As horrible and frightening it is to be part of the current uncertain situation; we must, however, not forget to look ahead. As the German future researcher Matthias Horx (2020) writes in his article regarding the current crisis:

*“Verzichte müssen nicht unbedingt Verlust bedeuten, sondern können sogar neue Möglichkeitsräume eröffnen.”*

(Sacrifice does not necessarily mean loss, but can potentially open up new opportunities. [own translation])

As the skies above major cities around the world clear blue, people start to realize the possibility for a permanent 'other version' (Hjorth, 2003). An awareness in which we may finally acknowledge our existence's dependency on the health of our environment. The social distance forced upon us by the virus has paradoxically resulted in a new closeness and search for belonging. We are contacting old friends to strengthen ties that had become loose. Families, neighbors, colleagues are moving closer and are sometimes even solving old hidden conflicts. It is in moments of crisis (or 'sickness') we are reminded of what we truly value. This knowledge is however not new, but something Freud (1937) noted in a letter he wrote near the end of his life: "The moment one inquires about the sense or value of life one is sick, since objectively neither of them has any existence. In doing so, one is only admitting a surplus of

unsatisfied libido" (p. 465). As this knowledge is rather old, it seems to have faded with time, and we may need a reminder to bring it back to our consciousness. Crises such as the current COVID-19 pandemic are such a reminder, and they unlock great opportunities for people to transform. It is from here we find the power to re-set, re-think, and re-design our personal, organizational, and institutionalized lives.

This notion dates back to Schumpeter's (1944) concept of 'creative destruction'. The current crisis shows us the flaws of our current system and where to start destructing some of societies' fundamental mechanisms and their inherent problems. The belief in today's window of opportunity for structural change is shared by French Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron, who in a recent article, states that it is time to 'think the unthinkable'. Macron proclaims that a positive side effect of the COVID-19 pandemic may be a re-design of our capitalistic systems (Financial Times, 2020). How we react to this crisis may impact the lives of generations to come. Thus, we can either wait to 'go back to normal', or preferably instead utilize this unique moment for 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter, 1944) to re-think the current and create a better 'new normal'.

The problems that the world currently faces remind us that solutions are found in human creativity and ingenuity. In culture, not in technology or systems that are driven by figures and growth. This exemplifies the current's potential to reflect on what should drive the change in this world and that current systems do not serve as answers in themselves any longer.

With COVID-19, we witness a shift in the relationship between technology and culture. While it was human intelligence, which helped the highly-praised artificial intelligence to become known as able to solve everything, artificial intelligence has so far only had a limited effect on corona (Horx, 2000). All of a sudden, the talks about a tech-driven world are gone, and back comes culture as we are reminded of what it means to be human. Play thereby has a unique opportunity to move from the fringe into the center of organizational discourse, drive structural change, and show the way for 'an other version' (Hjorth, 2003) of organizing. This 'other form' embraces and celebrates humanity as Homo Ludens – the human who plays (Huizinga, 1949) – and shows a way for organizing a 'new' world with less system thinking. A world driven by people, empowered by technology. Play forces us to be present and provides us with the possibility to create and react to 'the new' which we cannot foresee but must play into existence. Thus, to offer value in this new reality, businesses must make space for creativity, imagination, and entrepreneurship; A space where meaning can be taken apart, reconfigured, and put together differently to solve problems and create 'the new'. Play keeps us constantly moving. Especially in moments of crisis, we believe there is a need for movement forward.

Now is a unique moment for abstract thoughts of all kinds, including play, which challenges what is, and proposes new ideas so that we collectively can have a conversation about, and build, the organizations, institutions, and the world we wish to become.

## 1.2 Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to add to academic literature of play in context of organizational theory by investigating **how recognizing play in its totality (Huizinga, 1949) challenges the common understanding of organization and the logic of organizations**. The theoretical focus has been given by Burke (1971), who claimed that 'the boundaries between work and play are blurring', which causes us to begin researching the historically deep relationship between work and play. To answer the research question, our thesis is composed of three 'Acts', supported by the elaboration of our research design in the middle of the work (Intermezzo).

In Act One, we investigate the theoretical relationship between work and play, as well as how we understand the two concepts. The 'Intermezzo' describes our methodological approach, together with the theory we use to analyze our case studies. 'Acts Two & Three' constitute our synthesis and analysis of play in theory and in practice. Here, we will first propose a model of 'Colors of Play' as a conclusion of a synthesis of play literature (Act Two); Secondly, we aim to find indication for the 'model's' durability on a small amount of empirical evidence and thirdly, use the 'model' as a basis for interpretation of our case stories to answer our research question (Act Three).

This thesis, therefore, starts by examining the development of work, what it means, and how we have performed work historically. Concluding that the way we have been working and what work means today - just as play - relates to philosophical ideas on what it means to be human. We also find that protestant work ethics heavily influenced governmental rationalities. These are the underlying mechanisms that have been constituting the hierarchical structures still 'ruling' today, which are based on control. By introducing Huizinga's (1949) concept of Homo Ludens ('the human who plays'), we further look into existing literature to find an understanding of the nature of play. Based on this, we conclude that it is a concept, which, due to its many manifestations and rhetorics (Sutton-Smith, 2001), is hardly possible to define; A standard 'definitive' answer may not even be desirable.

The ambiguity, as well as the fact that play is not easy to define or categorize (a 'matter of concern' (Latour 2004)), makes it a concept that is difficult to control and, therefore, not



corresponding with the governmental rationalities today's organizations are built on. This, we will argue, is also one of the main reasons why Huizinga's (1949) understanding of play in organizational theory is hardly considered in its 'totality', and why it is mainly misunderstood in practice. In fact, although the concept of 'play' might seem to gain prominence since the cultural turn in the 1980s, there is a lot of prejudice and misunderstanding about play in organizational literature. Organizations often try to manage play, as they perceive it as a mere tool or resource (Miller 1996;1997 in Andersen, 2009). However, we believe that by limiting play to certain controllable aspects of organization, we ignore the entirety of opportunities play can bring organizations.

In order to come closer to these prospects, we will look at play as a 'matter of concern' (Latour, 2004). Latour's (2004) theory enables a rich conversation about play and the way we study how play challenges the common understanding of organization and the logic of organizations. Inspired by Andersen's (2007) theory of an 'Organization at Play', whose internal functionalities are profoundly based on social components - 'Communitas Lundens', we further synthesize the existing literature and theories to propose a 'model' of 'Colors of Play', which allows everyone to paint their own picture of play. The model moreover should serve as a lens to look at organizational structures and mechanisms which hold them together from the perspective of play. Thus, we aim to look at the opportunities play can bring not despite, but because organizations are 'at play'. With the help of empirical tests, we further aim to find indication for our understanding of play (the 'Colors of Play'), as well as the model's durability, to eventually analyze and interpret on mechanisms which hold playful organizations together.

To conclude, by referring to this data at hand and making interpretations on the case stories, we want to pose a viable question and therefore be part of the debate on how we understand organization and what an 'Organization at Play' (Andersen, 2009) might look like. With this, we aim to challenge the conversation about play in organizational theory, in order to give direction for organizations to create a space where meaning can be taken apart, reconfigured, and put together differently to solve problems and create new value.

## **2. ACT ONE: Literature Review (The Playground)**

### **2.1 Playing with Work**

What happens in organizations is work. On our endeavor to study how play challenges the foundation on what organizations are built on, we therefore first need to understand the concept of work. When we started our research, we wondered where the separation between work and life, companies still promote today when they advertise for "work-life balance", has come from. Therefore, we start examining the development of work, what it means to work, and how we have performed work historically. Secondly, the investigation into the history of work, showed that when life became more organized, concepts such as the 'opposites of work'/'non-work' (life, play, free time) emerged. This gives us a starting point, in our inquiry into the relationship between work and play and how this has shifted over time. We will show that in the pre-industrial era, work and play were intertwined, while in the industrial era, work, play, and creativity were strictly separated. In today's knowledge economy, we notice yet another shift: A return to the pre-industrial relationship, where the boundaries between work and play are blurred, and the two concepts become increasingly connected. Further, we conclude this chapter two by describing how the discourse on work relates to philosophical contemplation on the human agent (what it means to be a [wo]man?), and how these ideas throughout history, in turn, has affected how we build our institutions and organize our lives.

#### **2.1.1 HISTORY OF WORK**

##### **2.1.1.1 A Brief Historical Perspective: How Our Understanding of Work Has Developed**

Over time, our understanding of what work is and what it means to work has changed. Richard Florida and his book 'The rise of the creative class' from 2002 is currently one of the perhaps most celebrated contemporary business writings which has contributed to a significant change in how we perceive work in today's 'knowledge economy'. However, the changing meaning of work is not a recent phenomenon.

When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating an apple, their punishment for not obeying God's wishes is work. Work is what distinguishes life in paradise from the world we know. Since then, attitudes towards work and its opposite, such as idleness and play, have been changing constantly (Kavanagh et al., 2011). First, there were hunters and gatherers who all contributed to society and whose primary concern was to survive.

Eventually, people began to farm plants and animals, which led to larger settlements and new kinds of work and, if you were lucky, leisure. In some cultures, like in ancient Greece, the perception of hard work developed to be seen as undignified (Kochan, 2016). In Homer's *Odyssey* (written around 900 BC), the hero works at house-building. However, by the Golden Age (450–400 BC), Greek citizens perceived physical labor as demeaning and servile (Kavanagh et al., 2011:9), which is why it was outsourced to slaves and servants. The negative perception of physical labor is also found in the discussions of Plato and Aristotle when discussing the 'fully human life' both promote the life of the 'thinker' in contrast to the life of physical labor. Aristotle called it 'degrading' for the master to perform, or even know how to perform the duties of "handicraftsmen, who, as their name signifies, live by the labor of their hands" (Aristotle et al., 2008, p. 12 in Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 10).

Just as the life of the 'thinker' was celebrated in ancient Greece, Sutton-Smith (1997) recounts that play became highly prevalent during the pre-industrial Middle Ages, as it formed a constituent element of sacred work and ritual duty in pre-industrial societies (Turner, 1982 in Teichert, 2013): "For the pre-industrial skilled worker, work and life were intertwined, and play and leisure were natural aspects of working life" (West, 2015, p. 14). Especially where land was cheap and plentiful, people moved together and created a sense of community, in which time for play and festivals was a substantial part of life, and playful activities were celebrated and represented as a foundational social factor of society (West, 2015).

But even though these "[pre-industrial] societies apparently had more leisure time than more economically 'advanced' agricultural societies (Sahlins, 1974), the reality for most people in pre-industrial societies was that hard work was a necessity just to live. If work was good (because it was necessary) then not working [or the opposite of work, such as play,] must be bad" (Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 10). As the lives of people started to get more organized, work turned into an activity of its own, and with that came the birth of "free time" as a concept. Work and non-work became two individual parts of people's lives, and for most people, physical work had become necessary to live and survive. This changed play's role in people's lives and their perception of play (Kavanagh et al., 2011).

The emphasis on hard work was further magnified by the Protestant Reformation (1517–1648). The Protestant Reformation represents the perhaps most influential take on work, which still today dominates how western societies generally perceive work (Kavanagh et al., 2011). One of the core elements in Calvinist and Lutheran thinking is that hard work is at the heart of an individual's calling and success (Kavanagh et al., 2011). Hard work is perceived as virtuous, not only because of work's social and material benefits but primarily because of the belief that the hard-working individual is predestined to be saved by God. Even more, it is seen as a

means to give contributions back to society, a way to "love thy neighbor", and thereby also imparts community values. Work thus becomes moral and owns back its dignity and worth.

This attraction to the qualities of hard work and frugality has been persistent to Protestants ever since the sixteenth century (Kavanagh et al., 2011). The development of work and its connection to religion is important to inspect in a study of play because of Weber's argument that the "so-called Protestant work ethics is foundational to the development of capitalism" (Weber, n.d. in Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 10). This redefinition of the connection between work and piety, according to Kavanagh et al., (2011) shifted the individual's efforts towards rational behavior to achieve economic gain, which, therefore "underpinned the development of capitalism", although capitalism itself may have forgotten, disavowed or discarded its roots in religion over time (pp. 10-11).

When society shifted from a pre-industrial to an industrial model of organizing, and artisans started moving into cities, not only did the daily lives of people become more organized, their way of working also dramatically changed. With mass production and factory work, where individual handicraft is replaced by mass-production, and artisans are replaced by assembly lines, individualization, creativity, and play did not have any place. Play was even seen as the enemy of organized work (Sutton-Smith, 1997 in West, 2015). This attitude towards work is clearly exemplified in Henry Ford (1922)'s memoir 'My Life and Work', where Ford makes it crystal clear that there is no space for play in his factories:

*"When we are at work we ought to be at work. When we are at play we ought to be at play. There is no use trying to mix the two. The sole object ought to be to get the work done and to get paid for it. When the work is done, then the play can come, but not before."*

(Ford, 1922, p. 134 in West, 2015, p. 13)

Ford believed play was an activity that employees should engage in after work during their free time. Henry Ford and other 'industrialists' who were eager to embrace the Protestant's work ethics, emphasizing hard work and diligence as a way to salvation, have been blamed as the strongest and longest-lasting anti-play movement (West, 2015). A movement which today still dominates how we majorly think about play and work as two, almost opposite concepts.

The Industrial Revolution, which resulted in the creation of thousands of jobs, was one of the great drivers that developed the idea of the American Dream. The dream of religious freedom, economic prosperity, and the land of opportunities historically attracted many immigrants to

the US, and still signifies success in life as a result of hard work. This narrative led to the belief that talent, intelligence, and willingness to work as hard as possible, open up opportunities to the individual and can move anyone from 'rags to riches'. (This belief in hard work to prosperity in life; however, not only was an American phenomenon but could also be observed in more social-oriented European Societies.)

With the turn to the post-industrial area, one could observe a significant shift, as the goal of performing work moved away from mere production by repetition (industrialization) towards value creation (creativity and imagination). In this post-industrial society, the manual 'blue-collar' laborers were replaced with professional and technical workers (such as bankers, doctors, and computer engineers), while the production of goods was moved elsewhere (Robinson, n.d.). Work started to be seen as a lifestyle choice, and it became important to pair people with ideal jobs based on their personalities. People were not only seeking for money but also for fulfillment in their jobs. It was around this time, in 1919, where Briggs Meyers started to research into personality type theory, which became foundational for today's MBTI personality tests (The Myers-Briggs Company, n.d.).



*Figure 1: 1984 Apple's Macintosh Commercial (Dernbach, 2019)*

A very symbolic commercial for this change in time is the one from the multinational technology company Apple in 1984, which was broadcasted during the 18th Superbowl. It is based on the novel by George Orwell's 1984'. In the commercial, a young heroine frees herself from the 'Big Brother' and saves an army of soulless workers. It ends with the reference that 1984 will not be like the 1984 novel. By introducing the first personal Apple Macintosh, the company wants to communicate that with this change in technology, the future of work has begun, which is characterized by fun and expressiveness and that it is possible for everyone. This means that, in western post-industrialized countries, we could observe a change in what

it means to work, most notably described by the ideas of Florida, who emphasizes humans' creative capabilities as the most critical factor for economic growth (Florida, 2011). The success of companies like Google, IDEO, Facebook, and LinkedIn (just to name a few), who incorporated these values in their strategy and organizational functions, are reason enough to re-think about the distribution, or even relationship of work and play in our organizations today.

But this shift does not indicate that even though the lines between work and play might be blurring (Burke, 1971), we work less and play more. Most of us might not believe in the salvation by God anymore; nevertheless, we still believe hard work is what will bring us prosperity in life; If we work hard, we can build up a 'happy' financially stable future. Simultaneously, creativity has become something we all strive for, and something expected from us all. This is what Reckwitz (2017) refers to as the 'creative dispositif', the duality of the wish to be creative, and the imperative to be creative. While creativity has become something desirable for the economy, it is increasingly expected from workers and thus became obligatory. Today's 'creative' workers, such as consultants, creative designers, academics, and engineers, etc. are still trying to reach this 'American Dream' and are working hard every day to spit out innovation. However, for millions of not only unemployed but also the unhappily employed, this dream has not turned out to be so easy. If your daily hard work does not fulfill your soul, work can be doubly painful.

Thus, we can say that hard work is still seen as the means to progress in life, even though there might have been a shift in how we are working. What we expect from work will remain one of the greatest challenges for the future of work.

*“Today, we talk about the ‘whole employee’, who must be engaged, enterprising, flexible and adaptable.”*

(Andersen & Born 2001, 2007b, 2008 in Andersen, 2009, p. 2)

#### **2.1.1.2 Meaning of Work – Rooted in Ideology & What it Means to be Human**

Today's dominating perception of work is still highly connected with the protestant work ethic, as Weber (in Kavanagh et al., 2011) remarks. Our perception of work is, therefore, still highly steered by ideology, even today, where creativity seems to be the driver for value creation. Although capitalism might have forgotten its roots in religion, it still utilizes highly persuasive piety-inspired arguments to convince us that hard work is what it takes to progress in life. Hard work is the key to 'a better life' - hence the American Dream. This means that capitalism still

connects society's admiration of hard work to ideology. We, therefore, want to give a brief overview of the discourse of the meaning of work and its strong relationship to philosophical ideas about the role of the human agent.

‘What we are’ and ‘why we are here’ are questions which philosophers of all ages have given much time and contemplation. Historically, the question of the ‘meaning of life’ has often followed a conversation of work:

#### Homo Sapiens (human agent is idealized as a thinking, rational being)

Although the emphasis on Protestant work ethics (hard work) won major support during the industrial revolution and is still observable today, its ideals did not go unquestioned. Kavanagh et al. (2011) argue that two great enlightenment thinkers are here worth mentioning: First Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who reprised the classic Greek ideas of work from Plato and Aristotle. Kant celebrated reason and condition and, following Aristotle’s idea of the thinker, praising the human agent as a thinking, rationalizing being (Homo Sapiens). Kant thereby, like Aristotle, devalued physical work (Kavanagh et al., 2011). Secondly, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and his utilitarian philosophy which depicts humans as pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding creatures and perceives work itself merely as a means to an end. Within the utilitarian philosophy, work is depicted as effort, toil, and replete with pain, but necessary in order to progress in life (Kavanagh et al., 2011).

#### Homo Oeconomicus (rationalizing behavior, striving for maximization of benefits)

Utilitarianism defines the way of thinking for the Homo Oeconomicus (Habermann, 2008). In 1836 John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) gave the basic theoretical concept for Homo Oeconomicus as a topic in liberal theory (Habermann, 2008).

In his discussion concerning the Homo Oeconomicus, Hjorth (2003) points to an interesting paradox in the turn from Liberalism to Neo-Liberalism. Although both concepts celebrate choice and freedom, Neo-Liberalism has turned choice and freedom into control. Central to Hjorth’s (2003) argument is that while Liberalism celebrates the life of the thinker, freedom, and choice, neo-liberalism utilizes the same ideas in its quest to ‘manage’ people. Thinking of the human as not only rational but also a calculative being, not only allow us to organize today’s work and organizations but has further allowed to institutionalize a capitalistic system, in which all humans are played out.

“Neo-liberalism, of course, relates to liberalism which held homo oeconomicus to be the subject who rationally calculates its natural interests (maximizing pleasure,

minimizing pain) as an economic actor, and whose interests are drivers where unchallengeable by any 'environment'. Neo-liberalism (in the American version) radically inverts this classical homo oeconomicus. Neo-liberalism centres on a subject that is a manipulable homo oeconomicus, a subject whose interest can be managed, i.e. controlled.”

(Hjorth, 2003, p. 20)

Thus, our belief in freedom is paradoxical (played with), as it allows for what Hjorth (2003) refers to as 'governmental rationalities', which enables government “to operate on those who want what the governing ones search to achieve” (p. 20). This unveils a paradox of 'freedom': We are taught to go after our own interests “as an act of self-creation: 'Go on! You are free to choose'” (Hjorth, 2003, p. 20). This relates to the American Dream that we are free and have all opportunities in the world, while actually, we are managed (controlled). Thus, while both Liberalism, as well as Neo-Liberalism celebrate the ideas of individual interest, choice and freedom, the genuine ideology got 'manipulated' in Neo-Liberalism:

“For neo-liberalism, interest are no longer something which simply occur to economic individuals in their pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Rather, the play and interplay of interest require particular institutional, cultural or economic conditions... Choice is no longer the rational response of the economic actor to the calculation of one's natural interest. It becomes a fundamental human faculty that can be made calculable and manipulated by working on the environment and spaces within which it is exercised.”

(Dean, 1999, p. 159; Gordon, 1991 in Hjorth, 2003, p. 20)

Both historically and today, we have little difficulty in finding evidence for how 'governmental rationalities' have, and continue to, shape society and control the choices available to people. Their functions can, at times, be seen similarly as sovereignty: By following the rules, you stay in the game. Or, as Hjorth (2003) says, by bestowing power upon the obedient ones. Their driving mechanisms of control functions to separate people, making sure that everyone keeps what one has to her- or himself, while making it harder if not impossible for you to get what another one possesses (whether materialistic or intellectually).

We can observe these 'governmental rationalities' by looking at different examples of how the system works, what role work plays in our lives, or even more, how it defines who we are. One example is the increased protection of 'expert knowledge'. Certifications and licenses have become necessary for individuals to obtain certain 'titles' and professions,



making sure I set myself apart from you. What makes us experts in entrepreneurship? Is it the certificate that we receive after two years of study at an accredited institution? Or is the knowledge we have about the field?

The system is working as long as everyone is following the rules, playing their roles, and consuming as 'they are calculated for'. The current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic shows that, when people suddenly start to behave differently, by not being able to work as they are supposed to, and only consume what they actually need, the system starts to crumble.

### Homo Faber (man the maker, producer, a laborer)

An even more profound visual example of 'governmental rationalities' we find in the hierarchical structure of our institutions and organizations, which clearly distinguishes the managing from the managed. This separation became the center of social discourse in the nineteenth century, as the concept of 'Labor' started to emerge.

Work and the meaning of work represent perhaps *the* central construct in Karl Marx (1818–1883) 's philosophy which builds on Hegel's thinking as well as Benjamin Franklin's definition of 'man as a tool-making animal' (Kavanagh et al., 2011). At the heart of Marx's argument, and at the same time critique of the capitalistic system, is that work is foundational to human identity. [Wo]man for Marx is Homo Faber meaning [wo]man the maker/worker. Marx thereby sees labor as what makes us who we are (Kavanagh et al., 2011). The French verb 'oeuvre', which means to work by creating (Monthoux, 2000 in Linstead, S. & Höpfl, H., 2000), elegantly captures this idea.

Although Marx saw [wo]men as makers, he did not side with 'industrialist' and 'governmental rationalist' such as Ford and the aspiration of control. Center to Marx' argument is that work should be fulfilling, but capitalism turns work into something unwanted. Because of what Marx calls 'alienation', work under capitalism becomes something painful. With capitalism's emphasis on control and 'governmental rationalities', the product of the worker has become "alien to him, stands opposed to him as autonomous power. The life which he [/she] has given to the object sets itself against him [/her] as an alien and hostile force" (Marx, 1844/1964:123 in Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 12). To Marx, this process dehumanizes us and degrades the very thing which sets us apart from animals. Marx argues that the separation of the worker from the object he or she creates ultimately "mutilate the worker into a fragment of a [wo]man, degrade him [/her] to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy the content of work by his [/her] agony, and alienate him [/her] from the spiritual potentialities of the labor process" (Marx quoted in Giddens, 1971, p. 57, in Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 12). Marx concept of 'alienation' and its dehumanizing effects are beautifully portrayed in Charlie Chaplin's

comedy movie and most likely also criticism of society, *Modern Times* from 1936. In this movie, Charlie stars as a blue-collar worker working at an assembly line, driven insane by the monotony of his job.

### Homo Ludens (reason, making & playing animals)

Returning to the question of 'what it means to be a [wo]man', we can say that the dominant tradition historically has idealized the human agent as either a thinking being (*Homo Sapiens* – from the Latin 'wise man'), an even more rationalizing, calculative being (*Homo Oeconomicus*), or (highly influenced by Marx) as a producer, a laborer (*Homo Faber*, man the maker). We also saw that all these ideas of what it is to be human very much impact how we institutionalized our systems and designed our life.

In the following, we will see that although these understandings of the human agent have dominated, they have not been uncriticized. The Dutch historian Huizinga (1949) directly attacks this understanding of humanity in his book '*Homo Ludens*' and argues that play is both essential, primordial and foundational to what it means to be human: "play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 3). To Huizinga play is essential for our understanding of being, culture and civilization:

"A HAPPIER age than ours once made bold to call our species by the name of *Homo Sapiens*. In the course of time we have come to realize that we are not so reasonable after all as the Eighteenth Century, with its worship of reason and its naive optimism, thought us; hence modern fashion inclines to designate our species as *Homo Faber*: Man the Maker. But though *faber* may not be quite so dubious as *sapiens* it is, as a name specific of the human being, even less appropriate, seeing that many animals too are makers. There is a third function, however, applicable to both human and animal life, and just as important as reasoning and making namely, playing. It seems to me that next to *Homo Faber*, and perhaps on the same level as *Homo Sapiens*, *Homo Ludens*, Man the Player, deserves a place in our nomenclature."

(Huizinga, 1949, p. xi)

Huizinga therefore stresses that we have to look at all different functions of the human agent (thinking, reasoning, rational, and makers), while at the same time appreciating the human as playing; *Homo Ludens*. This, so Huizinga (1949), is necessary to understand culture, which impacts our civilization, and as our brief 'time travel' has shown, how we institutionalize our systems, our lives, and the way we work.

### 2.1.2 SUM UP HISTORY & WORK

To conclude, the fact that work, just as play, relates to our philosophical ideas on what it means to be human, unveiled great clarity on the development of work and its meaning over time. We further described how the protestant work ethic had influenced ‘governmental rationalities’ to treat play and work as two distinct, unrelated concepts. Based on this, we can say that play and community have always been returning as important factors in people’s work historically, just as the two concepts (work and play) once again are becoming increasingly connected in today’s knowledge economy (Burke, 1971; Florida, 2011). By examining all different functions of the human agent (Homo Sapiens, Homo Oeconomicus, Homo Faber, Homo Ludens), we could see that play is, in fact, elementary to the human condition (Kavanagh et al., 2011), just as culture.

Huizinga’s (1949) thinking did however not dramatically change the general perception of work instantly. In the following pages, we will see that academic thinkers within organization and management theory have been slow in adopting play in their work. However, this slowly started to change when the academic fields took the ‘cultural turn’ in the 1980s, and organizational theorists started to realize the potential of Huizinga’s (1949) philosophy of play and culture (Kavanagh et al., 2011). We will moreover elaborate why the ideas about the human agent, can hold important lessons for entrepreneurs wanting to create the ‘the new’ (Section 4.1.1: ‘Colors of Play’).

## 2.2 Play & Organization

*“Every child knows what it means to play, but the rest of us can merely speculate. Is it a kind of adaptation, teaching us skills, inducting us into certain communities?”*

(Sutton-Smith, 2001, n.p.)

To come closer to an understanding of how the concept of play challenges the way we understand organization and the logic of organizations, in this review, we want to investigate how the concept of play and organization are connected. Before we can talk about play in organizations, we want to understand how previous scholars attempted to define and categorize play and its meaning in order to understand more about the nature of the concept itself. Doing so, we will elaborate on that play can be many different things and that it is a concept that does not fit well into boxes or categories.

With this knowledge, we will further try to go after the questions what the highly ambiguous character of play, which has led to so much diversity in literature, tells us about the nature of play in organizations today, and how we deal with this very issue regarding organization creation (Kavanagh et al., 2011). More specifically, we will show that this ambiguity has led to prejudice and misunderstanding, especially in organizational literature, which further caused play primarily being used as a tool and resource (Miller 1996;1997 in Andersen, 2009), which does not allow for the totality of the opportunities (Huizinga, 1949) play might bring. To go come closer to these prospects, Andersen (2009) and Sandelands (2010) proposed new versions for a social organization, which helped us understand play in the context of organization theory on a meta level. Their ideas challenge the very essence of what a typical organization nowadays is built on – a foundation built on the logic of control. We believe play challenges this logic of the traditional organization creation process, play is an in-between phenomenon that moves in the space between the regulatory and the experience much in line with how Monthoux (2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000) thinks about ‘The Aesthetics of Organization’. Based on this, in section ‘4.1.1 The Colors of Play’, we will finally propose a new ‘model’ of our understanding of play as synthesis of our literature research. This palette of ‘Colors of Play’ will help us look at the concept as a ‘matter of concern’ (Latour, 2004), and to have a conversation about its applicability in our analysis.

### Play vs. Game

Before moving on, we want to clarify that we see game and play as two different concepts. Games are designed and often contain clear rules which likewise predefine the actions possible within the game. For example, Chess is a game that contains clear rules for how each chess piece can move around the board and it is evident who is the winner (outcome). This means that although there may be many possible actions in any given moment in the game, these actions can be calculated. The clear rules of the game are also what players utilize when forcing the opponent into a checkmate. What exactly play is, is however a very hard question to answer. Huizinga who is perhaps the farther of play literature, writes, “In acknowledging play you acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter” (Huizinga, 1949:3). Play is not materialistic; it is not something we can pick up and show to people. While games are designed, play occurs naturally. A construct made up of various elements. Although play and game are two distinct concepts, they are however not always strictly separated. A game may very well allow for elements of play, but play will never be a game. Play only serves play and entails freedom to evolve its own nature. In play, one is not able to presuppose direction and outcome.

### Organization vs. Organizations

Furthermore, two other concepts that we see differently are 'organization' and 'organizations'. 'Organization' refers to the act of creating order/ to organize. How things and concepts are put in order can be highly individual. Some may separate fork, knives, and spoons in their kitchen drawer; others may be fine having them all mixed together. When principles of order are shared with others, organizations emerge. 'Organizations' are institutionalized entities, an organization. They fixate a desired 'principle of order' or what we may call 'laws'. Their functions are traditionally to govern and make sure these 'laws' are upheld. For example, the moment a family has given their pots and pans a determined space in their kitchen, the family takes form as the governing organization, which make sure all members of the family follow 'the law' and put the pots and pans back at their 'dedicated place'. Briefly summarized: 'organization' is the act of creating order, and 'organizations' make sure this order is followed.

#### 2.2.1 DEFINITIONS OF PLAY AND ITS AMBIGUITY

*“An infant plays with a toy;  
a professional footballer’s work is to play;  
a corporation’s stock can be ‘in play’;  
we visit the theatre to see and enjoy a play;  
and we can play a musical instrument.”*

(Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 1)

Play can be loads of things; it is ambiguous in meaning, a transitive and intransitive verb, a noun, and an adjective. It can be an attitude, an action, a lack of action, and both cause and effects. It can convey a surprising range of meaning when coupled with other words e.g. “to play on words is to manipulate them, to play off is to react to, to play with is to join or to manipulate, to play out is to follow through” (Eberle, 2014, p. 217). But the more we are concerned with describing play in one satisfying definition, a standard that stays true no matter who or where someone plays, the more we become aware of play’s many facets and “authenticity” (Sutton-Smith, 2001). While it is not that difficult for us to identify play once we experience it, as “we all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like” (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 1), scholars from various fields have shown that it is not easy to find a fully satisfying standard definition for play. However, that has not stopped various thinkers from trying to define it.

It seems like, that the attempts of many scholars to capture the concept of play in its complexity, only further enriched what we know of the many facets of play and its meaning, and thus made any clear definition even harder. Their common approach has been to note the salient aspects of play in order to identify criteria and eventually define these standards, which should help us to sort out what is play and what is not play (Eberle, 2014). One of the most famous definitions of play is provided by Huizinga (1949) who opens his discourse on play by summarizing the 'formal characteristics' which he calls 'features' of play:

"Play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it [no material interest]. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner [it is order]. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means."

(Huizinga, 1949, p. 13).

Center to Huizinga's argument is the idea that play is foundational for our understanding of human being. Huizinga (1949) proposed Homo Ludens as a third 'function' next to Homo Faber, and perhaps on the same level as Homo Sapiens. At the time of writing, Huizinga (1949) raised criticism of how the research of psychology and physiology had addressed play, which focused on the observation, description and explanation of the play of animals, children, and grown-ups. Huizinga (1949) argued for the need to understand play as a 'totality' rather than focusing on descriptions and explanations: "We shall not look for the natural impulses and habits conditioning play in general, but shall consider play in its manifold concrete forms as itself a social construction... We shall observe play itself and thus try to understand play as a cultural factor in life" (p. 4).

The understanding of play as culture became perhaps *the* central idea to Huizinga's discourse on play. As Caillois (1957) writes, when he describes the work of Huizinga (1949): "[Huizinga's theory is that] culture emanates from play. Play is simultaneously freedom and invention, fantasy and discipline. All the important manifestations of culture are derived from it" (p. 94).

### 2.2.1.1 Further Definitions & the Authenticity of Play

*“Why does the child play?”*

*Heraclitus asks.*

*‘He plays because he plays’*

(Kavanagh et al., 2011, p.22)

With his writings, Huizinga (1949) inspired a broad range of scholars outside psychology and physiology to pay attention to play and take the concept seriously. Boiled down the list of some of the key thinkers within the field include Caillois (1961), who identified four forms of play (agon, alea, mimicry, ilinx), and six attributes of play (free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, make-believe).

Sutton-Smith (1997), who dealt with play’s ambiguity, and introduced the concept “authenticity” to describe play’s many facets (2001), has been highly referenced for his list of seven rhetorics of play: progress, fate, power, identity, imaginary, self, frivolity (in Kavanagh et al., 2011). Further, Kane (2005) contrasts three of the ‘modern rhetorics’ of play put forward by Sutton-Smith (progress, imagination, and selfhood) with three ancient ones (fate, power, and identity) (in Kavanagh et al., 2011).

But how can we understand the ‘authenticity’ of play, besides it being a very smoky (Kavanagh et al., 2011), ambiguous concept, and what is meant by play being ‘authentic’? Next to the idea of ‘flow’ describing the experience where the individual becomes completely absorbed in the activity ‘play’ itself, Csikszentmihalyi (1975), who is building on the work of Huizinga (1949) and Caillois (1961) about the ‘quality of play as such’ (in Kavanagh et al., 2011), proposed and empathized the ‘autotelic’ nature of play. In contrast to ‘heterotelic’ activities, where behavior is completely directed outwards towards external objectives and rewards, autotelic activities are to be understood as behavior that is going inwards “onto the very essence of play itself” (Kavanagh et al., 2011:22). This means that play must exist for its own sake, and players, in turn, do not seek for other reasons to play than the very purpose of playing (Eberle, 2014); It is thus having a non-biological purpose which does not allow the question for “why” and “wherefore” of play (Huizinga, 1949).

Focusing on play in organizational settings, Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) published one of the first papers which gathers past definitions of play. The authors further introduce the idea that play in organizational settings is manifested as a form of either engagement with work tasks and or as a form of diversion from them. Updating the work from Mainemelis and Ronson

(2006), Petelczyc et al. (2018) further investigate how both classic and more contemporary academic work has engaged with play. Like Mainemelis and Ronson (2006), Petelczyc et al. (2018) collect previous definitions of play. Besides the above-stated definition of play from Huizinga (1949), Table 1 summarizes the most used definitions of play today. The table is built on the work from Petelczyc et al. (2018) to which we have added a definition of play from Andersen (2009).

Caillois (1958)	Plays is an activity that is free (not compulsory), separate (takes place within fixed time/space limits), uncertain (the direction and outcomes are unknown beforehand), governed by rules (managed), and make-believe.
Dandridge (1986, p. 161)	“Play is contrasted to work as a freely chosen activity: something we do because we want to rather than have to.” Both chronologically and physically, boundaries are defined around play; the outcomes of play are often uncertain and unknown and are not the focus of play; and play is related to emotions”
Starbuck & Webster (1991, p. 73)	“Activity that produces both immediate pleasure and involvement”
Bogdan, Crump, & Holm (2005, p. 140)	“Play is carried out in the pursuit of wellness, and it “connects value spheres and mediates important boundaries in social activities and personal existence in all human societies; it is the occasion of collective and individual eruptions of passion, of exuberance and anger, of resistance and agitation, of effervescence and candour”
Mainemelis & Ronson, (2006, p. 84)	“A behavioral orientation consisting of five interdependent and circularly interrelated elements”: 1) a threshold experience (the knowledge that that play is different from ordinary life); 2) boundaries in time and space; 3) uncertainty-freedom-constraint (play entails surprise, uncertainty, or unresolved possibility); 4) a loose and flexible association between means and ends; 5) positive affect.
Sandelands, (2010, p. 72)	Play is “a sharing of life with others... Arising in community, play is the form that love takes at the boundary between fantasy and reality where new social arrangements arise to take the place of old social arrangements”
Andersen (2009, p. 80)	<p>‘Play occurs when the rules of the actual world have been suspended’</p> <p>“Play represents a distinct communicative doubling machine. Play doubles the world so that we have a world of play and a real world, and the doubling takes place on the side of play. That is, the real is not the real as such but the real world as it looks from the perspective of play. The real world observed through the form of play is the reality that the form of play plays with”</p>

*Table 1: Most Used Definitions of Play in Organizational Literature, own illustration adapted from Petelczyc et al. (2018).*



From their analysis of the previous definitions of play, Petelczyc et al. (2018) further extract seven 'features', from the above stated definitions: 'time and space', 'whether play is freely chosen', 'positive affect as an outcome', entail 'rules', and whether play is 'social', 'is absorbing', and 'involves make-believe'.

According to Petelczyc et al. (2018), this broad spectrum of features and definitions has led to considerable confusion and ambiguity in our understanding of play. However, rather than celebrating play as an ambiguous concept, Petelczyc et al. (2018) desire a more precise conceptualization, and propose the following definition of play from Van Vleet & Feeney (2015):

"[Play is] an activity or behavior that (a) is carried out with the goal of amusement and fun, (b) involves an enthusiastic and in-the-moment attitude or approach, and (c) is highly interactive among play partners or with the activity itself."

Van Vleet & Feeney (2015, p. 640)

### **2.2.1.2 Critical Voices Towards a Definition of Play**

The tendency and desire for a single universal definition of play is, however, challenged by other writers. One example is West et al. (2013), who are very clear in their argument that play's inherent ambiguity makes it a very hard, if not impossible concept to theoretically define. This argument relates back to Huizinga's (1949) argument for the need to perceive play as a 'totality' - rather than inquiring into descriptions and explanations for play. And this notion is perhaps even further elaborated in Huizinga's (1949) argument that "in acknowledging play you acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter" (p. 3). What Huizinga (1949) thereby means is that play is not a tangible, materialistic object. By being a 'product of the mind' what play is, and what is not play, is a subjective experience.

This notion is further affirmed by, Kavanagh et al. (2011, p. 2) who state that all "definitions of play [...] face the problem that play is a liminal, in-between phenomenon: a child playing 'cops-and-robbers' is both a robber and not a robber at the same time". Instead of aiming to define play, Kavanagh et al. (2011) use different 'dictionary understandings of play' to understand and discuss the concept:

*First, play is about free movement in time and space;*

*Second, play is 'to do something without seriousness;*

*Third, play is a theatrical performance or dramatic composition;*

*Fourth, play is a synonym for gaming;*

*Fifth, play is connected to the related concepts of jesting, the comic and foolishness;*

*Sixth, play is semantically connected to sex, erotic play and flirtation;*  
*And seventh, the concept of play is linked to sound, and music in particular: 'to perform on (a musical instrument)', 'to produce sounds'*

Following this thought, Sandelands (2010) represents and also emphasizes a more 'abstract' perception of play. He argues that play "is a form of human community, rather than a form of individual life" (Ibid., p. 72) and proposes four 'puzzles' of play being: 'attraction' (play is an activity we like to do), 'synchrony' (players move together in time and space, as if they were choreographed), 'merger' (a feeling of 'oneness' very close to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow'), and 'selflessness' (play is both totally consuming and self-possessing). By looking into these puzzles, Sandelands (2010) proposes an understanding of play "as an expression of human community; that it is a sharing of life in love with others. This opens up a new perspective on how to understand play, being that "[...] play is not to know in pieces by analysis but holistically by its feeling" (pp. 72-73).

Picking up the notion of authenticity, Sutton-Smith (2001), who's 'rhetorics' we already mentioned above, deals with the science of play and celebrates this very idea that comes with play's nature and ambiguity. In his work, he organized all aspects of play into different groups, while registering all multiple kinds of play, the multiple kinds of players, as well as the diversity of existing theories. He moreover stresses the issues that come with the analysis of play, namely the 'implicit narrative', or purpose (Eberle, 2014) of study that is indirectly imposed by authors, just as we will present our story based on our underlying ideological values to you in this thesis. He calls these different contexts' rhetorics' and claims that they must be considered when looking at different authors' definitions of play. What they are thus influencing is "[...] not so much the substance of play or of its science or of its theories, but rather the way in which [...] these matters are both subsumed by the theorists and presented persuasively to the rest of us" (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 8).

According to Sutton-Smith (2001), the fact that play is inherently variable is part of the reason why play scholars have been talking past each other. This means that "[...] observation does not automatically bring us closer to refining the concept. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case: the settings change, the play interval varies, the intensity rises and falls, and then intent and other human circumstances shift and morph" (Eberle, 2014, p. 214). Sutton Smith, therefore, tried to come closer to an understanding of play as a concept, by embracing this very authenticity and balancing all the existing definitions to one 'consilience': "Play, as a unique form of adaptive variability, instigates an imagined but equilibrated reality within which disequilibrium exigencies can be paradoxically simulated and give rise to the pleasurable effects of excitement and optimism. The genres of such play are humor, skill, pretense, fantasy, risk,

contest, and celebrations, all of which are selective simulations of paradoxical variability” (Sutton-Smith, 1999 in Eberle, 2014, p.219).

Finally, not only the fact that no language will be able to capture play in its ‘totality’ (Huizinga, 1949, p.3), (“the limits of my language are the limits of my world”; Wittgenstein, 1889-1951); But also the fact that there is nothing to interpret in play as there is no exterior purpose of play than play itself (Csikszentmihalyi in Kavanagh et al., 2011), makes the concept a particularly difficult ‘object’ to study. Facing this, we note that due to play's ambiguity, it's various manifestations and 'rhetorics', a single universal definition of the concept is hardly possible; A standard 'definitive' answer (as in Latin *definire*, from *de-* (completion) + *finire* 'finish' (from *finis* 'end')) is perhaps not even desirable? So why is it that, although play's ambiguity is highly recognized within the field, so many scholars spent their time and energy trying to isolate play as one single thing, rather than accepting its ambiguous and diverse nature? Instead of focusing the discourse on definitions aiming to tell what is play apart from what is not, we should perhaps rather focus on enriching the language we have to communicate, understanding play as a 'matter of concern' (Latour, 2004).

We, therefore, share the thought of Eberle (2014) who writes: “Even if a list of attributes such as ours could be entirely clearcut, however, to make an inventory of traits is not truly to define play any more than to say ‘a rose smells sweet’ defines a rose” (p. 216).

## 2.2.2 PLAY IN ORGANIZATIONS

However, one area in which people always tend to long for definite answers is indeed within business. Historically, traditional management and organizational literature took little time to 'play'. This is perhaps due to 'spill-over-effects' from the Protestant work ethics and 'governmental rationalities' (strictly separating work and play), which has guided scholar's thoughts and thereby left little room for play. Exceptions within the field do however exist. We find some of the earliest signs of play in organizational theory in the literature regarding creativity. This notion at least goes back to Schiller (1759-1805) and his idea of *Spieltrieb* – the playful drive which "unifies form and substance through artistic beauty" (in Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 21).

Creativity became the driving force that allowed play to enter business thinking. In contrast to industrial thinking and 'governmental rationalities' - where play was perceived as dangerous to business – the concept of 'organizational play' started to win popularity in the 1980s. In this period, play is given functional attributes, and the main argument is that play, under certain circumstances, may benefit organizations (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011). Nowadays, having shifted to a knowledge economy (Florida, 2011), creativity becomes central

in both popular business writing and academic literature. Both creativity and imagination are highly understood as the drivers for the creation of new value. In this creative world, where being different is more celebrated and valued than fitting into every environment, black-and-white thinkers are being left behind (Business Insider in Florida, 2011). Mainemelis & Ronson (2006) even perceive play as 'the cradle for creativity', allowing play to move further into the spotlight of organizational theory and, eventually, business practice. In the following, we will describe that literature on play in organizational theory, as well as the business world; however, may not have adopted play in a very playful way.

### 2.2.3 PLAY IN ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY

Although the discourse of play in organizational theory has been inspired by the classic 'play thinkers' such as Huizinga (1949) and Caillois (1961), the debate in organizational theory seems to have got off-track from inquiring into play as a 'totality' (Huizinga, 1949). Petelczyc et al. (2018) very recently published a comprehensive and integrative review of academic writings addressing play and work. According to them, play in organizational theory has developed its own theoretical focus (emphasizing clear definitions, with the aim to be able to separate play from what is 'not play') and two empirical focuses examining the 'antecedents' (drivers for) or 'consequences' (outcomes) of play outcomes from two levels of analysis being perceiving play as either a 'trait' or 'behavior' (Petelczyc et al., 2018).

Petelczyc et al. (2018) categorize the current state of knowledge of play and work into four theoretical perspectives:

1. Stimulus-Seeking Perspective of Play (influenced by Ellis, 1973; Starbuck & Webster, 1991),
2. Flow Perspective of Play (mainly dominated by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) however also Abramis (1990) contributes),
3. The Cathartic Nature of Play (DesCamp & Thomas, 1993; Ellis, 1973; Giddens 1964), and
4. Social and Cognitive Processing Perspectives of Play (Rosch, 1975; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Webster & Martocchio, 1993).

On the other hand, Petelczyc et al. (2018) argue that the main empirical findings from earlier research on play in relationship to work have focused on examining the 'antecedents' (drivers for) or 'consequences' (outcomes) of play. Petelczyc et al. (2018) state that while the stimulus-

seeking theoretical perspective on play focuses more on the drivers and motives for play, the other three perspectives (flow, cathartic nature, and cognitive and social processing perspectives of play) focus more on the outcomes of play. Furthermore, Petelczyc et al. (2018) state that the empirical inquiry into play has departed from two dominating levels of analysis, perceiving play as either a 'trait' or 'behavior'. However, Petelczyc et al. (2018) also note that there is a third level of analysis, slowly growing, which perceive play as an 'organizational feature', such as workplace fun (i.e., perceptions/climate for fun; Fleming, 2005 in Petelczyc et al., 2018, p. 171). However, the amount of such research is still rare.

Especially in the time where the majority of businesses still needed to be convinced of the power of play, the idea to study its 'behaviors' and 'traits' was probably a way for certain authors to catch businesses' attention and remove some prejudices and promote play as something that also can be very serious indeed. Here, governmental rationalities are important to mention again. In order for companies to be able to act according to play theories, the literature on play needed to ensure two things: First of all, clear advantages of play needed to be presented that allowed to look at the concept of play as something that needed to be taken seriously; And second, clear definitions and categorizations, which allow for planning and control ability needed to be given.

We see multiple authors publishing articles regarding how 'serious' forms of 'organizational play' (e.g., in the form of games, a short break from work) benefit the organization, some of these works, for example, focus on how 'organizational play' enhance job satisfaction (e.g., Abramis, 1990), increase bonding and motivation (Rood and Meneley, 1991), increase trust (e.g., Hunter et al., 2010), lead to creativity (Yarnal & Qian, 2011; Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006), improve divergent thinking and problem solving (e.g., Jacobs & Statler, 2006), relieve stress, build a friendly atmosphere and contribute to a high commitment culture (e.g., Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011), and increase innovative behavior (Hurmelinna-Laukkame et al., 2016).

By looking at that the existing literature that has been accumulated over time, we would argue that organizational theory has been moving away from Huizinga's (1959) theory of play's seriousness, as it has been based on the ability to plan for companies. Aiming to bring the understanding of play in its 'totality' (Huizinga, 1949) back to life, Sørensen & Spoelstra (2011) represent one of the loudest voices rising critique of how organizational theory has inquired into play (mostly as either 'trait' or 'behavior'):

“The blind spot that we find in the idea of serious play and critical thinking about work and play is that they basically are only able to see play from the point of view of work. Play is evaluated in terms of how it may contribute to the work of the organization, and how it may colonize the working employee, respectively. This perspective has its merits, of course, but what it systematically fails to engage with is how work may look from the perspective of play. Almost all studies of play subsume play under work, and while this is both conceptually and empirically valid, we want to point out that one may observe work from the point of view of play: how does work look when observed from play’s perspective?... While in most studies play ‘inspires’ work and makes it more ‘creative’, it never takes over work and changes the way the organization operates, in a way that may go against managerial intent. Play on this account remains a tool, not an activity in its own right.”

(Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011, pp. 84-85)

To conclude, by limiting the inquiry into play as either a 'trait' or 'behavior', organizational scholars might have forgotten the words from Huizinga (1949), emphasizing the need for understanding play as a 'totality'. In order to understand play at work, we therefore need to look at work from the perspective of play and appreciate play’s totality, which cannot be controlled by work. For play to outlive its full potential in organizations, Sørensen & Spoelstra (2011) argue that play should not only be used as a 'tool' or a 'resource' (Miller 1996;1997 in Andersen, 2009) but rather let play become the work of organization.

We also found that there is very little literature on the relationship between play and organization. In the following, we will, therefore, take a look at new visions and theories in that field and will elaborate on the fact that although classical organizational theory seems to have neglected its relationship to play, play theory surely has not neglected its relationship to organization.

### **3.2.3.1 The Social Organization**

#### How Organizational Play All Comes Back To “What It Is to Be Human”

Andersen (2009) is proposing different levels for how an organization can engage with play. He is thereby going even further in his understanding of how organizations are not just using the concept as a resource, but rather as a whole new state of organization, and is thus aligning Huizinga’s (1949) claim that play: “creates order, is order” (p. 10). Andersen (2009) applies a meta level of how organizations can understand play, while trying to grasp all of the concept’s potentials. An ‘Organization at Play’, is different than ‘organizational play’, which refers to

games etc. Please note that when we refer to an 'Organization at Play' throughout this thesis, we always refer to the idea of Andersen (2009).

What we can see in Andersen's (2009) study is that the idea of businesses itself being a form of play is not a new phenomenon. He argues that the relationship between play and organization can be categorized into three historical phases:

Time	Forms of Play	The Relation Play/ Reality	The Function of Play
1860 onwards	Competitive games	Play symbolizes the reality of the organization	Amplification of the organization's rules
1955 onwards	Training and simulation games	Play has to strive towards a simplified representation of the organizational reality	Training and testing of competent adoption of roles
1980 onwards	Social creation games	Play <i>is</i> reality and facilitates interactional creation of the organizational reality	Invitation to play the organization and its social relations into existence

*Table 2: Semantic History of Play and Organization, own illustration adapted from Andersen (2009, p. 69)*

We want to add at this point that Andersen's (2009) semantic analysis points to an interesting difference between what is play and what is a game.

Andersen (2009) describes how 'competitive games' in his first phase "constitute a specific form of doubling of what was considered to be the essence of market economy and of the industry: competition [...]. At the same time, however, competitive games were not competition itself. They were set free from a specific purpose. Competitions were organized for the sake of competition itself. This was their playful element" (2009, p.69). According to him, competitive games thus were in themselves not 'play', it is the inter-play between players, perceived from a meta-level of analysis, which turn the competitive games into play (Andersen, 2009).

From 1955 onwards, play in organizations shows itself in forms of training. Games were designed to teach the players certain skills and highly used by organizations. In this period, games were perceived as opposed to cases. Where one learns from cases, games allow individuals to experience for themselves while learning (Andersen, 2009).

Lastly, Andersen (2009) describes how play and organization took a third semantic turn in the 1980s. From this time onwards, games are not only seen as organized forms of play but play itself is meant to be organizing. Andersen (2009) writes: "the games become social

creation games. Reality is not represented through play. Play is reality, and the organizational reality has to be played into existence. In other words, we have a reality of play” (p. 69).

### The ‘Organization at Play’

In this theory, Andersen (2009) proposes an understanding of play as a ‘suspension of the rules of the actual world’, through doubling the organization’s existence into a virtual world and a real world. In this perspective, Andersen (2009) divides the ‘Organization at Play’ into two systems, a playing one and a decided. The process of this, he describes as:

“[The] organization’s self-doubling into an organization that is played into existence and an organization that has been decided, where play represents not a brief parenthesis at a staff seminar, which quickly disappears into the past but an ongoing activity entailing decisions that continually encourage more play. And perhaps even more radically: the organization at play has on one hand a decided organization and on the other hand a multiplicity of games with their own imaginary universes. So, the organization is doubled into two systems, a playing one which produces contingency and new virtual possibilities, and another one which fixes contingencies in decisions making. And the two systems in the system construct an ultra cycle of mutual productive disturbances constituting at stage of transformation” (Ibid., pp. 90-91).

The doubling of the organization thus keeps the organization in a constant state of change. Andersen (2009) writes: “it is an organization that makes it impossible for the organization to fix itself. It is a form of organization that signs away its own unambiguous unity and obtains a different multiple unity, which becomes possible precisely because it is just something we are playing” (p. 92).

Play’s relationship to change in organizations is neither a new thought. The American management theorist Marry Parker Follett wrote about the problems of change in organizations and saw the organization as a ‘functional relating’. A successful organization to Follett is a self-generating, self-reinforcing, and self-adjusting coordination. And in this way Follett sees the successful coordination as ‘play’ (Follett, 1942 in Sandelands, 2010).

“Functional relating is the continuing process of self-creating coherence. Most of my philosophy is contained in that sentence. You can take that sentence, I believe, as a test for any part of business organization or business management. If you have the



right kind of functional relating, you will have a process which will create a unity which will lead to further unities – a self-creating progression”

(Follett, 1942, p. 200 in Sandelands, 2010, p. 83)

### Communitas Lundens

Andersen (2009) playfully by-names his idea of an ‘Organization at Play’ *Communitas Lundens* and is thereby referencing *Homo Ludens* by Huizinga (1949). Because ‘we are just playing’ the number of possible states the organization is able to exist in, and the differences the organization can tolerate dramatically increase. This opens the organization up for its players (employees) to play with what the organization is, which brings a broad range of possibilities and new opportunities to the firm. In this type of organization, there is a constant surplus of possibilities that travels between the virtual and the real (Andersen, 2009).

The type of ‘playful organizational structure’ Andersen (2009) suggests, challenges the ‘governmental rationalities’ and their desire for control, most traditional organizations today still rely on to function. For Andersen’s (2009) ‘playful organizational structure’ – ‘*Communitas Lundens*’ - to gain traction and remain alive in their intended form, we need to think differently about which forces can keep such a structure together. And rather than play being a manageable tool, we may return to the thinking of Sandelands (2010), who argues that the answer to which force that can keep such a playful structure alive is found in community.

Aligning to Andersen’s (2009) theory above, Sandelands (2010) states: “Arising in community, play is the form that love takes at the boundary between fantasy and reality where new social arrangements arise to take the place of old social arrangements. Even when enacted by individuals alone, play is not about individual persons enacting within the whole of the human community” (p. 73).

Sandelands (2010) proposed love as *the* force which holds the human community together. To understand this claim we need to understand how Sandelands (2010) sees love as: “the dynamic tension between the division and unity of human being. It is simultaneous movement toward unity across differences (e.g. as persons or groups seek to overcome the differences that separate them) and movement toward differentiation within unity (e.g. as persons or groups seek to maintain their identities in their bond)” (p. 77). Aligned with Andersen (2009), it is thus about an inter-play in communal life that surpasses the individual; Play thus happens in conversation.

Contrary to the organizational model developing since the industrial age where control is the force that holds the organization together, in Sandelands (2010) and Andersen’s (2009)

ideas about community and love, the authors thus propose a radical new force that holds organizations together. Alternatively, we may say that in an 'Organization at Play' (an organization played into existence by its community), trust and love substitute control. Here, just as in animal wildlife, authority is not given, but in constant conversation (tension) and earned by the community. What keeps the organization playful is love's "movement towards differentiation within unity", and simultaneously loves' "movement toward unity across difference" (Sandelands, 2010, p. 77). The love between the members of the community (e.g., employees in an organization), is what keeps the group together, so that new ideas, possibilities, and opportunities that emerged through play undertaken in the organization, still fit the community/organization as a whole. Responsibility in this form of structure is shared, and everyone is responsible for the balance between unity and differentiation.

Thus, we can identify that both authors proposed theories that refer back to the human aspects of play, aligned with Huizinga's (1949) theory 'the playing [wo]man'/ 'Homo Ludens'.

#### **2.2.3.2 Brief Discourse: Are Boundaries Between Work & Play Blurring or Not?**

While we increasingly recognize continuity in linking organization, work, and play (Andersen, 2009), the relation of this linkage, meaning whether the boundaries like Burke (1971) said are blurring or not, as well as the approach of studying these both phenomena, are very different. There are voices, who build on the argument from Burke (1971), while for some this idea just resides on this observation that play has proven to have a positive impact on organizations, there are other authors who see in it the "rise of the creative class" (Florida, 2011); A "community in which everyone plays at work and works at play" (Dahl 1972 in Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011). Sørensen & Spoelstra (2011), for instance, counter Burke's (1971) position by saying that work can be overtaken by play, but "[...] work is not able to entirely take over play; [...] When play usurps work, work is no longer work; it has in fact been overtaken by play" (p.94). In other words, this means that the natures of both concepts remain separate, they "co-exist" (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011).

Based on this, we would argue that once work turns into play, it does not mean that work stops, and play starts. We believe it very much depends on how we understand not only play but more importantly, work. If we move away from the utilitarian idea of work as a mere means to an end, we believe there is indeed a stage where work and play can not only co-exist, but merge. A stage where work does not feel like work anymore (play as 'flow', Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Therefore, we will also, in the following, refer to the boundaries between the concepts work and play as 'blurring' (aligned with Burke, 1971).

But how much play is there really in today's organizations? In the following, we will elaborate on how businesses began to 'play with play'.

#### 2.2.4 PLAY IN BUSINESS PRACTICE

As already argued in earlier parts, within business practices, thinking from the industrialization - 'governmental rationalities' (control) – has shaped the perception of play's role in business. The echo from Ford's philosophy (strictly separating play and work and further leaving no room for play in his factories) have remained loud for years. However, Kavanagh et al. (2011) argue that we are currently witnessing "a move from hierarchical, rationally organized management structures to more informal and playful organizational forms" (p. 14), where boundaries between work and play are blurring.

However, even though organizational forms might increasingly become more 'informal' (Kavanagh et al., 2011), the way organizations engage with play has, following the critique of Sørensen & Spoelstra (2011), remained at the level of perceiving play as a tool serving the purpose of the organization: The common understanding is that play is something controllable. This is evident in the writings of Jacqueline Miller (1996;1997 in Andersen, 2009), in which she describes how play has become an essential resource in modern businesses. Focusing on how organizations engage in play, Mainemelis & Ronson (2006) state that organizations engage in play as either a 'distraction from work' or as 'engagement with work tasks' (i.e. controllable tasks).

An example of Mainemelis & Ronson's (2006) function of organizational play as a 'distraction from work' we find in Google where the work environment include "football, pool tables, volleyball courts, assorted video games, pianos, ping pong tables, and gyms that offer yoga and dance classes" (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011, p. 14). Other companies who are famous for incorporating play activities into their daily routines include IDEO and Southwest (Kavanagh et al., 2011). Mainemelis & Ronson's (2006) second function of organizational play - 'engagement with work tasks' – is exemplified in how LEGO's concept of 'Serious Play' is 'implemented' into organizations, in which players use LEGO bricks in for example strategy or scenario planning workshops. What is noticeable with this type of 'organizational play' is the desire for the activity to serve a 'valid business purpose' – hence the name 'serious'.

To conclude, what we can notice in studying the applications of play in business practice, is that it seems necessary for play to be labeled 'serious' to gain acceptance (Sørensen &

Spoelstra, 2011; West et al., 2013). At later stage of this thesis (section 4.1.1.3), we will argue, however, that what businesses understand as 'serious play' is different from Huizinga's (1949) thinking of 'seriousness' in play. In fact, 'play' in business has been turned into something quite superficial, focused on 'games' designed to serve a particular purpose, something that can be controlled and used when necessary.

## 2.2.5 SUM UP PLAY & ORGANIZATION

In this chapter, we aimed to investigate the connection between play and organization. To do so, we needed to take a closer look at both concepts.

After giving a brief overview of how we have been organizing our way of working until date, we noticed that the discourse on work and play relates to the philosophical ideas of the human agent. This further unveiled great clarity on the way we have been working and organizing life until today.

To understand how the concept of play challenges the way we understand and set up organizations, we further needed to investigate the nature of play. We found that it is a highly ambiguous concept that has led to many different interpretations by many various scholars from various academic fields. By looking at the realm of literature existing about play we were able to see that, especially in the context of organizational theory, we moved away from perceiving play in its 'totality' (Huizinga, 1949). This means that by limiting our inquiry into play to certain controllable aspects of organization, hence trying to manage play and see it as mere organizational tool or resource (Miller, 1996; 1997 in Andersen, 2009), we will not be open for all the opportunities that play potentially can bring organizations.

We moreover introduced a new vision of how to understand play as social organization (Sandelands, 2010), an 'Organization at Play' (Andersen, 2009), which relates to Huizinga's (1949) idea of 'Homo Ludens'. We furthermore provided a glimpse of the opportunities play can bring by cherishing the power that lies in the humanity of it. Based on this review, we saw that play and community have always been returning as an essential factor in people's work throughout history. Although separated by the industrial revolution, the two concepts (work and play) are once again becoming increasingly connected in today's knowledge economy.

### **3. Intermezzo: Methodology**

At the beginning of this thesis, there was a desire to investigate play in organizations, as we are fascinated by its power as form of engagement and creativity (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). We wondered what opportunities this might create, and how little is still known about play in the context of organization. Inspired by Andersen's (2009) theory of an 'Organization at Play', we want to explore play as an organizational state. Hence, how does an organization which is 'at play' change how we understand organization?

In our quest for answers, we contacted several organizations in which we believed we could observe this specific type of play embedded in their everyday organizational behavior, which is brought about by their organizational structure. As this topic is still very underdeveloped and somewhat abstract, we also knew that this initial situation of 'investigating play' entailed some implications when choosing a research approach for this project. We already elaborated on that due to play's ambiguity and its various manifestations, it is a particularly difficult object to define, and why we instead will treat it as 'matter of concern' (Latour, 2004). We, therefore, realized that in order to come closer to an understanding of how the concept of play challenges the way we understand organization, no observation would automatically bring us closer to refining the concept (Eberle, 2014). Therefore, we synthesize a palette of 'colors' of play in an organizational context (see section 4.1), which holds the potential to carry a conversation about this phenomenon in the analysis of our cases.

In the following, we, therefore, clarify the 'how' and the 'why' concerning our research question. We begin by declaring our epistemological position and further explain how it influenced our research design. Lastly, we elaborate on how we collected and analyzed our data.

#### **3.1 Research Philosophy – Our Point of View**

When starting research in any form of science, there are a few essential but very crucial decisions to be made. We need to decide how we make sense of the world around us in order to find a common point of view in this research project. This philosophical position will influence our work at every step of the way, as it will manifest in certain practical implications for our research design. We, therefore, spent a substantial amount of time constructing a viable question, which allows us to participate and contribute in the debate (Hancké, 2013) regarding how to understand play in its 'totality' (Huizinga, 1949) in order to understand organization and

the logic of organizations; And furthermore investigate how an 'Organization at Play' could look like.

Due to play's ambiguity, we know that play is rather a 'matter of concern' than a 'matter of fact' (Latour, 2004). Therefore, an understanding of play requires a rich conversation between multiple parts. We also know that conversations are defined by complex situations, which makes it very hard to make generalized statements about data at hand. Aligned with this, we believe that the social world of business and management is far too complex to be theorized by strict 'laws' (as in the physical sciences), and that far too many rich insights would be lost by reducing this complex event "[...] to a series of law-like generalizations" (Saunders et al., 2006, p. 106). As constructivists, we, therefore, aim to study the details of a specific story or maybe the reality working behind it (Remenyi et al., 1998 in Saunders et al., 2006). Following our central belief that the world is not objectively given, waiting to be discovered (Hancké, 2013), we view social phenomena as constructed in a continual process of social interaction, created by mutual influence with other people (Bryant & Cox in Badham et al., 2011), always able to be revised. We, therefore, make use of language to coordinate our relationship to the audience, and through that, hopefully, arrive at a meaning - thus understanding - for "how people work together to produce the realities that we all live by" (Campbell, 2000, p. 9); Hence the 'Organization at Play' (Andersen, 2009) that we aim to understand better.

#### Why Am I Standing in Line? ("Ich fühle mich wie eine Kuh")

„In this way the line-standing structure is reinforced. People begin to act and interpret the world – as well as judge others – via structures that normalize certain behaviors as being more moral and natural than others. People who stand in line are evaluated as polite and good, and those who do not are judged as rude and poorly behaved. In this process, 'standing in line' creates a grand narrative that is helpful in some ways, but makes it difficult to imagine alternative possibilities“ (Tracy, 2013, p. 29).

Strauss et al. (1973 in Bryman, 2016) brought forward an example of a psychiatric hospital, which, as an organization, is conceptualized best as 'negotiated order'. Rather than an institution with social order as a pre-given characteristic, it consists of several social 'understandings' which are constantly negotiated anew and re-worked. Even more, the authors argue that fixed hierarchies, rules, organizational charts, and regulations tend to neglect the fact that order within organizations has to be established or even accomplished, and thus are subject to individual actions every day. Perhaps the metaphor of social constructionism helps us understand the way realities are constructed from many voices and their relationship to

organization (Campbell, 2000). Like Campbell (2000), we, therefore, take a “[...] position that deliberately shifts the emphasis of organizational life away from the static concept of a structured organization and towards a more dynamic concept of evolving discourses that are maintained by dialogic communication, but, in turn, determine which dialogic conversations are possible” (p. 30). It could even be argued that the organization cannot be defined nor labeled, as it is constantly changing, continuously reinvented through the interactions of social actors (Campbell, 2000).

The realization that social understandings are constantly negotiated (Bryman, 2016), was fundamental for our endeavor to be part of the discourse regarding play in an organizational context. We therefore also see our understanding of play as socially constructed, as it is a form of ‘in-between conversation’ based on our knowledge, thus prior experiences. Therefore, we would argue that even individual experiences, like play, are, in fact, socially constructed. By having a conversation about play’s ambiguity, we, therefore, aim to change the perspective of the current interpretative glance, and therefore as vital impetus to rethink how we understand organization.

*“The world...is constituted in one way or another as people talk it, write it and argue it.”*

(Potter, 1996, p. 98 in in Bryman & Bell, 2018, p.29)

### **3.2 In Search for an Approach/ Way – Process**

*“And only with reluctance did I ever ask the way – that always went against my taste! Rather I would question and try out the ways themselves. ‘This – is just my way: where is yours?’*

*Thus, I answered those who asked of me ‘the way’. For the way – does not exist!”*

(Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 169)

Having a way is important in a thesis, as our problematizations need context, and to find context, we need a way (Hjorth, 2003). Nietzsche very well captures our process of ‘constructing our way’ throughout this thesis – an understanding of ‘way’ as an open-endedness, and as such ‘way’ also means ‘waylessness’ (Hjorth, 2003).

In this thesis, we aim to find an understanding of play, to discover the opportunities it can bring in an organizational context. In the following, we want to emphasize the ‘construction’ of our unique way of investigating the phenomenon of play. Rather than adopting a predefined

methodology process right from the start, we tried to remain playful along the way, which has led to adventures - 'waylessness' (Hjorth, 2003) - into areas of the world, we did not foresee when we initiated our investigation into play.

Facing this current COVID-19 pandemic, we clearly see that the social world is complex, and as such, we believe this always requires a certain degree of openness hence 'waylessness' (Hjorth, 2003) in our way. Being open and able to pivot along the way, also means that inspiration and knowledge from unexpected areas may find you, just like it was the case for us. Starting with a general interest in what play means in the context of organizations, we can retrospectively split up our research process in three different stages; We call them 'Acts':

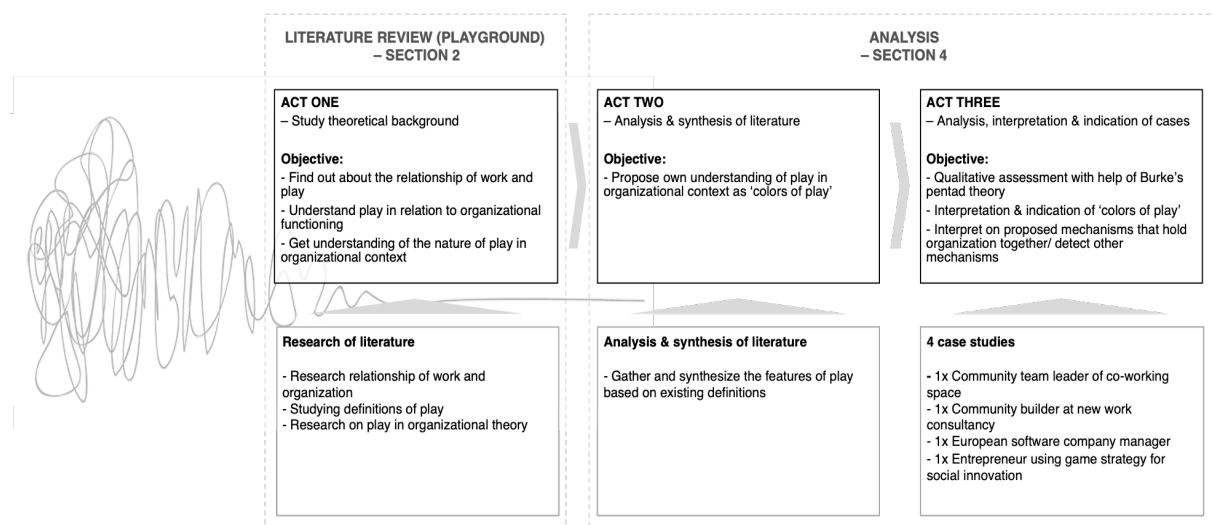


Figure 2: Research Process - Our Way, own illustration

### 3.2.1 ACT ONE – Study theoretical background

What initially puzzled us about play and caught our attention was the claim that the lines between play and work are blurring. To understand this very discourse and relationship, we needed to take a closer look at both concepts. We thus began by studying the historical development of work and organization (section 2.1), before we summarized existing literature on the nature of play, as well as the role of play in organizational theory (section 2.2). We did this to come closer to our understanding of play as a concept and set the fundamental understanding for how the concept challenges how we structure and create organizations (the mechanisms that hold organizations together).



### 3.2.2 ACT TWO – Analysis & synthesis of literature

In Act Two, the first part of our analysis and synthesis of the literature, we illustrate and elaborate on our understanding of play in an organizational context; An 'Organization at Play' (Andersen, 2009). Looking at previous attempts on how play has been studied in organizational theory as well as how it is implemented in practice, helped us find new links in existing literature. Through gathering and synthesizing our findings from the literature, we aim to enrich the understanding of play in the context of organization, by proposing a rudimentary 'model' of 'Colors of Play'. With this palette, we moreover elaborate on how we see this concept linked to entrepreneurship. We want to mention that, even though referring to the 'Colors of Play' as a 'model', we do not see it as something 'static'. Therefore, we chose the metaphor of 'colors', by which we emphasize the fluidity of our 'model', where 'colors' and meaning can be mixed or stand out on their own. A 'model', which furthermore should adapt its own nature, potentially loose or add new colors and shades, as we gain more knowledge about play in management and organizational theory. As we will use our 'Colors of Play' for the analysis of this thesis, we will, however, also in the following refer to it as form of a 'model'.

### 3.2.3 ACT THREE - Analysis, interpretation & indication of cases

Taking all these findings from the first two acts, we further aim to discover whether our propositions manifest in real-life cases. More specifically, we try to investigate whether we can find the identified 'Colors of Play' in the 'stories' of our interviewees and how that changes how we understand organization. For the analysis of the cases, we make use of Burke's (1945) Dramatistic Pentad theory (in Tracy, 2013), which serves as a framework to dissect the interviewees' story. Based on this, we will interpret how these 'colors' relate to the organizational functioning and whether we can identify an 'Organization at Play', as a community played into existence by the interplay of the Pentad's elements (a becoming organization). Doing so, we further hope to get an idea of whether playful structures challenge the governmental rationalities of control, and if so, which other mechanisms then hold the organization together.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

The analysis of this thesis is based on two large categories of data: a comprehensive literature research and analysis based on secondary data, as well as interviews with four companies. In the following, we will describe how we approached the data collection.

#### **3.3.1 SECONDARY DATA – (Literature Research)**

The most prominent part of every literature review is the literature search itself (Vom Brocke et al., 2015). Procedure errors, such as missing relevant publications or the use of incorrect data, can have a significant impact on the quality of the literature analysis (Ibid.). However, the purpose of our literature review is not to provide a summary of everything which has been written about our research topic but rather to select and review the most relevant and significant research on it (Saunders et al., 2009). Our overall approach in searching for literature can be separated into two phases, and further described as a combination of a narrative and systematic review (Ibid.).

##### **3.3.1.1 The Two Phases**

###### Phase 1: Preliminary literature search: Narrative review [find area of interest]

Initiating our research, we aimed to enrich our general understanding of play in a broad field rather than accumulating knowledge for which a narrative approach serves as a means of “gaining an initial impression of the topic” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 110). This process can be described as a somewhat uncertain process of discovery that allows for great flexibility and ambiguity (Ibid.). Within this process, we as researchers, are allowed to be guided by our interest as we browse through the literature. We also would like to mention here, that the people we met at the beginning of this work and the conversations that resulted from these encounters (as we became members at one of the organizations we use as a case study) also played a role in how we approached literature research. This phase of our literature search enriched our understanding of play and was used to discover issues that we did not previously anticipate. As this process of discovery by nature is less explicit about the criteria used for exclusion, we have collected all 24 publications uncovered in our preliminary narrative review, including their keywords, in Appendix (1).

## Phase 2: Main literature search: Systematic review [accumulate knowledge to build model]

While our more 'adventurous process' of discovery in the preliminary narrative review uncovered a specific area of interest - play & organization - a more systematic literature search was applied to accumulate knowledge about this field, which constitutes the foundation for our literature review and consequently the basis for building our 'model'. Table 3 below provides an overview of how we approached our systematic literature search.

<b>1) Approach</b>	Iterative		
<b>2) Technique</b>	Keyword Search	Backward Search	Area Search
<b>3) Databases</b>	CBS Library Search	Scopus	EBSCO
<b>4) Documentation</b>	Search Log		

*Table 3: Literature Search: Systematic Review Process, own illustration*

1) Approach: We used an iterative approach in our search for literature. This approach promoted an understanding of new topics and concepts and allowed us to refine and expand the search as we progressed in our research (Vom Brocke et al., 2015). The continuous searching, reading, and learning also offer the opportunity to determine whether the scope of the literature search is saturated (Ibid.).

2) Technique: We soon realized that by perceiving play in its 'totality' (Huizinga, 1949), we are navigating in a rather new field within organizational theory. Moreover, we also learned that the use of a keyword technique has its complications when researching a concept such as 'play', which is not only ambiguous in its meaning, but also in its application. The word 'play' is often used in titles of articles and books in a way which is not necessarily relevant to our literature review, for example, "how does management's attitude play a role [in x, y, z]?". To filter out these results, we created 'search phrases' by combining keywords to target a more specific area within the literature of higher relevance for our research. Our first refined keyword search entailed the search phrase «'Play' [title] AND 'organization' [any field]», which resulted in 15 relevant publications consisting of 13 journal articles and two books. From this first query, we discovered a special issue of Organizational Studies titled 'Special Issue: Organizational Creativity, Play and Entrepreneurship'. We looked through this special issue and discovered two other articles that had 'Play' as [subject], which was not found in the first query. The first query furthermore discovered an extensive integrative review and agenda for further research

published by Petelczyc et al., (2018). Based on this article, we performed a backward search with the search phrase «'Play' [subject] AND 'organization' [any field] OR 'management' [any field]». This resulted in 24 relevant publications, of which 18 journal articles and one book. At this stage, we shared our literature list with our supervisor Daniel Hjorth who suggested adding two further books relevant for our research. We then performed another keyword search with the search phrase «"Play at work" [any field]» resulting in three further journal articles. Lastly, as we kept reading, we found it interesting to perform a second backward search based on Sørensen & Spoelstra's (2011) paper with the search phrase «'Play' [subject] AND 'organization' [any field] OR 'management' [any field]» resulting in one further book added.

3) Databases: For our backward search, we used Scopus. The keyword search was carried out based on both the CBS Library Search and the EBSCO database. We used two different databases, as suggested by Vom Brocke et al. (2015). These two databases were selected firstly, as we are familiar with the search options in these databases, and secondly, as these databases offer broad access to scientific literature.

4) Documentation: To document and illustrate our systematic literature review, Vom Brocke et al. (2015) propose the use of a search log. Our detailed search log can be found in Appendix (2).

### **3.3.1.2 Literature Quality**

Through the selection process described above, a total of 44 publications were selected, of which 38 academic journal articles and six books. To secure quality the selected academic journals were validated. It was furthermore essential for us to ensure diversity in the data. The selected 38 articles come from 22 different academic journals ranging from *Psychological Reports*, to *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, to *Organization Studies*, to *Journal of Management*, to *Accounting, Management and Information Technologies*. The complete list of academic journals can be found in Appendix (3).

### **3.3.2 PRIMARY DATA – (Case Studies for Indication of 'Colors of Play')**

For our second part of the analysis, we can identify three different types of case organizations (section 3.3.2.2). In these exploratory case studies, our proposed 'model' of 'Colors of Play' in an organizational context is analyzed and indicated in the corresponding case. Moreover, next

to the aim of finding an indication for the duality of our 'Colors of Play', we try to get new insights and directions (Saunders et al., 2006) to understand organizations 'at play' with these cases.

One territory of qualitative research is the narrative inquiry. We view stories as a fundamental connection to learn about human experiences (Clandinin, 2007 in Tracy, 2013). As individuals reveal the ways how they interpret their experiences and identities, we chose to gather our primary data by treating every case as one story.

“We all tell stories about our lives, both to ourselves and to others; and it is through such stories that we make sense of the world, of our relationship to that world, and of the relationship between ourselves and other selves. Further, it is through such stories that we produce identities”.

(Lawler, 2002, p. 239 in Tracy, 2013, p.29)

As we not only use this data to analyze ‘what’ happens in the stories and ‘how’, but also aimed to put “emphasis on exploring the ‘why’” (Saunders et al., 2006, p. 313), we chose to do semi-structured interviews. For our second part of the analysis, we, therefore, make use of our transcriptions and notes from each interview to understand the interviewee’s narrative as a window for how they interpret certain situations “and create a reality that they, in turn, act upon” (Tracy, 2013, p.29). The interviews we conducted took place via online communication tools and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

In the following, we will elaborate on the theory that helps us analyzing these narratives, which we will refer to as stories.

### **3.3.2.1 Case Theory – Dramaturgical Analysis with Burke’s Pentad**

*“Life is not like a drama. Life is a drama”*

(Walker & Monin, 2001)

The idea of analyzing different players in the context of organization is not new. Goffman (1956) developed the idea that play is at the very foundation of organization. His dramaturgical paradigm perceives organizations as institutionalized performances of 'actors' engaging in 'dramatic roles' (Kavanagh et al., 2011). The individuals learn to wear a 'mask', or different 'masks', in harmony with the diverse set of social and organizational parts which they play. For example, an architect who is also a single mother, a passionate sourdough baker, a writer for

a design magazine and, a weekend lesbian within Berlin's underground and hedonistic subculture – all wear these different masks, and many besides, at their appropriate time.

With departure in Andersen's (2009) concept of an 'Organization at Play' - an organization which is played into existence – we aim to use Burke's Pentad analysis as the Pentad "provides a system of perspectives from which reality may be viewed" (Kneupper, 1979, p. 133). Thus, we aim to investigate the individual actor's role as well as the underlying meaning of their action taken in the act of playing the organization into existence. We are thereby applying knowledge from the theater in the context of organizational theory just like multiple prior studies which have captured the dramatic aspects of organizations (Czarniawska-Joerges & Wolff, 1991; Mangham, 1990; Mangham & Overington, 1987; Jackson, 1999; Austin & Devin, 2003).

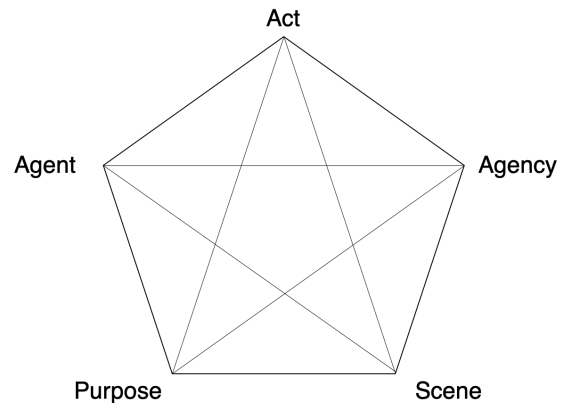
The same way as in a theater performance, in which actors play their part and act upon it according to a particular interpretation (may it be the director's interpretation or their own), interpretivists see humans as 'social actors' playing a part on the stage of human life, interpreting our "everyday social roles in accordance with the meaning we give to these roles" (Saunders et al., 2006, p. 106). However, not only our own roles but also the roles of others are interpreted "in accordance with our own set of meanings" (Ibid., pp. 106-107). "This is a crucial point because, as each organization creates discourses about itself [through its individuals], this enables us to see more clearly the organizational influence on individual behavior" (Campbell, 2000, p. 19). In contrast to searching for patterns of similarity, interpretivists are thus looking for an understanding of a situation within context, to "[...] arrive at causal explanations of its cause and effects" (Bryman, 2016, p. 29). We, therefore, question how things happen rather than what is happening to result in the explanation of action.

Social science indeed is a debate, in which all of our prior knowledge and experiences affect how we interpret and view reality. Although we try to be as objective as possible throughout our research, we are aware of this science's strong subjective moment. In fact, we see this not only as negative bias but rather essential in order to find and answer the 'how' in the discourse that builds up and constitutes our social world.

### The Theory

Burke (1945) initially introduced the Pentad theory as a method for speakers to persuade others of their reality (in Tracy, 2013). He sees human drama as a natural human condition (Tracy, 2013), which always consists of the following five elements, all of which help us to see the individual's motives of their actions and to see them in a broader organizational context.

**The Act:** What is happening?  
**The Scene:** When & Where is it happening?  
**The Agent:** Who is acting?  
**The Agency:** How is it happening?  
 (The means by which the agent was enabled to accomplish the action)  
**The Purpose:** Why is it happening?  
 (The intended effect of the action)



*Figure 3: Burke's Dramatistic Pentad, own illustration based on Tracy, 2013, p. 211*

Burke emphasized the value looking into what he called 'dramatic ratios' – the relationship between any of two elements of his Pentad, to get an understanding of motive from different perspectives. If we take an example of a car accident where a young new driver drives his car off a damaged road. One perspective of motive could be the actor-to-act ratio, which in our example could say that the actor (the young driver) caused the act (the accident) because of his inexperience with driving. Taking a different perspective from the scene-to-act ratio, we could argue that a damaged road (scene) caused the act (the accident). The ratios offer us different perspectives to interpret the event.

### How We Make Use of Burke's Pentad

For the analysis and interpretation of our 'case stories', we make use of the 'dramatic ratios' to describe how the relationship between elements of Burke's Pentad (act, agency, scene, purpose, agent) may affect each other, and in some instances change the nature of the elements. We thereby do not use the ratios to determine motive but rather to look at our stories from different angles and identify how, for example, a scene may change an act and vice versa. We thereby look at the stories holistically, and the ratios help us understand how the interplay between the Pentad's elements influences the story itself (a change in scene may lead to a new act). A perspective where the interplay between these elements represents the play undertaken in our stories. The more the ratios are allowed to affect each element, the more we may say the case organization is 'at play'.

The ratios thereby shed light on how an 'Organization at Play' may be understood as played into existence by the dramatic ratios - the interplay of the Pentad's five elements. An 'Organization at Play' is thereby an organization in which the elements of the Pentad are fluid rather than static, and open to be influenced by each other - the 'dramatic ratios.'

This means that our analysis does not consist of assigning our cases' data to specific elements in the Pentad but seeks to tell different stories about ratios that showed interesting connections which we would identify as play. We therefore make use of naming the elements for each case in order to tell the story and make our argument on where we see play – according to our 'Colors of Play' – happening.

In order to see these stories in a larger organizational context, we will thus make use of Burke's Dramatism Pentad theory as an analytical framework to guide us in our analysis of the stories we have collected and to help us map out our interview data. This will also help to elucidate the complex connections and interactions "of causal processes in this very specific situations or contexts" (Maxwell, 2004, p. 256 in Tracy, 2013, p. 219).

By looking at the interplay of the elements (or what Burke calls 'ratios') and how these affect each other, we try to tell a story about the individuals in the community they are part of. Carefully expressed, we use Burke's Dramaturgical Pentad to understand these aspects of 'greater life' (Sandelands, 2010) that are 'in play', and how these aspects shape each case's story. We think of every individual's 'communal life', as the center of a community. This communal life is, therefore, what we aim to analyze with the help of Burke's Pentad theory, which helps us to interpret an 'Organization at play' as a community played into existence by the interplay of the Pentad's elements.

Aligned with our philosophical point of view, that all individual understandings are social, we, therefore, see this theory as a fitting approach in order to tell, analyze, and interpret the stories about play. Departing in our analysis with our 'Colors of Play', which we will introduce in the following (section 4.1.1), we want to look out for 'Organizations at Play' (Andersen, 2009), how the individuals are playing and how they are played (Sandelands, 2010, p.73).



### 3.3.2.2 Introduction of The Cases

The approach of planning and finding interview partners was as follows. In order to get a broad set of opinions on what role these identified colors are playing in an organization, we looked out for three different types of interview participants:

Type A (Playful behavior expected): To get new inspiration and insights on play in organizational practice, we reached out to an entrepreneur who utilizes games to co-create social innovation. We thus consider hir as an expert on how to make use of play in an organizational context. (Case SerialFund LLC, section 4.2.1)

Type B ('Organization at Play' expected): Based on our findings from Act Two & Three (the 'Colors of Play' in an organizational context), we moreover specifically looked out for organizations where we hoped to see and therefore identify the 'Colors of Play' (an 'Organization at Play'; Andersen, 2009). We, therefore, reached out to two organizations that work and rely on strong communities, as we assumed they share certain social aspects with organizations that allow for playful structures. (Cases Scrabble LLC & Catan LLC, sections 4.2.2 & 4.2.3)

Type C ('Organization at Play' not expected): To avoid 'expert' bias, we wanted to look at environments where we did not assume to find an 'Organization at Play'. We were interested in this case as well, as we believed to (1) verify our finding and assumption of the current system and organizational functioning that based on control, and (2) wanted to look out for playful structures in this story, even though we did not expect to see an 'Organization at Play'. Here, we therefore approached a large (international) and already established corporation. (Case EuroSoft SE, section 4.2.4)

At the beginning of each case analysis in Act Three (section 4.2), we will introduce the case organization and further elaborate on the interviewee's role in that organization. Upon request from the interview partners, all names mentioned in this thesis have been anonymized and gender-neutralized (therefore, we use the gender-neutral pronoun 'hir').

### **3.4 Sum Up Intermezzo: Methodology**

The introduction of the scientific literature in Act One illustrates the theoretical part of this thesis, which will lead us in the synthesis of our model, the 'Colors of Play', in the following chapter (4.1 Act Two). Furthermore, we will test the model on a small amount of empirical evidence (our case stories), which should give us an indication of our 'colors' durability and at the same time open up a conversation about other 'colors' and mechanisms that this perspective on play as a 'matter of concern' (Latour, 2004) support.

Thus, if we were to name the research process we ended up pursuing, we would 'classify' it as a deductive approach as we used existing literature and theories in order to build up our model, which we consequently test with empirical data (Saunders et al., 2006).

By referring to data at hand and interpreting the case stories, we want to pose a viable question and therefore be part of the debate concerning how we understand organization and what an 'Organization at Play' looks like. Just as in why we are standing in line, we, therefore, want to challenge the conversation about play and how we understand organization to eventually create new meanings that allow us to discover a new way of how organizations function.

## 4. Acts Two & Three: Analysis

In this chapter, we will begin our analysis with Act Two, synthesizing the literature and theory gathered in act one into a ‘model’, before we move on to Act Three, in which we will test our model with empirical data.

### 4.1 Act Two (Analysis & Synthesis of Literature)

*“By defining play you are unplayful.”*

(West et al., 2013)

Mapping out literature as well as developments in practice, illustrated how delicate the discourse about the understanding of the concept of play is. Play is ‘not matter’ (Huizinga, 1949) but rather and an individual experience. The fact that play is so ambiguous represents a provocation for some, especially those who try to seek definite answers (e.g., in a business context). This ambiguity calls upon individuals to make up their mind about the concept, in order to know and feel how it is experienced, while appreciating that this experience is highly individual too. It is thus about making up your mind about a concept, instead of adopting a pre-defined ‘factual’ definition made by someone else. This very issue can be found in Latour’s (2004) distinction of ‘matter of fact’ and ‘matter of concern’.

On our endeavor to look at organizations from the perspective of play (instead of work), we, therefore, want to arrive at an ‘understanding of play’ without reducing it to a means-end logic that is foreign to play itself (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011). By synthesizing existing definitions and theories of play from literature and sort them anew, we aim to enrich the language we use ‘concerning’ (Latour, 2004) play. This way, we enable a rich conversation about the applicability of play, how we understand it, and what opportunities play might bring organizations.

However, in order to guide the conversation about play and analyze ‘Organizations at Play’ in our case studies, we feel it is helpful to at least a certain extent ‘categorize’ the different thinking already existing. Though, instead of using the word ‘categories’, we want to refer to the properties of play as ‘colors’. Instead of trying to come up with a single definition of play that grasps all of its aspects, or seeing it as either black or white, something we strongly advocate against, we aim to enrich the already diverse understanding of play by providing a palette of ‘Colors of Play’. This palette should thus help readers to not only understand our

picture of play that we came up with after the literature research but also allows them to mix colors and even create different shades to paint their own pictures – their perception and ideas of what an ‘Organization at Play’ is.

Our standpoint is that instead of trying to reach some general, factual, truth regarding play outside ourselves (‘das Ding an sich’; Kant, 1724-1804), we are much better off, and respectful towards the concept of play by aiming to enrich our language for contemplation of the concept (‘das Ding für uns’; Kant, 1724-1804). The ‘Colors of Play’ force us to depart from a factual generalization of play and require us to approach the concept as a ‘matter of concern’ (Latour, 2004) - a form of ‘gatherings of ideas’ (Ibid.) in which things come to ‘be’ because they collectively are talked about, cared for, and worried over. A constant conversation of continuous meaning creation in line with our research philosophy. We thereby acknowledge that our ‘Colors of Play’ do not capture every possible meaning of play there is to be discovered in the context of organization. However, that is not our intention, as we aim to make a proposition that should kick-start a new and ongoing (never-ending) conversation.

Since we are aware of the sensitive proposition we are making, we consider the ‘Colors of Play’ to be a first attempt towards literature on appreciating all different ‘colors’ and ‘shades’ of play in the context of organization, a topic that is still fairly unexplored. With the ‘Colors of Play’, we further aim to come closer to an understanding of the opportunities play might bring organizations. We would, therefore, see the following ‘Colors of Play’, our model, as fluid, exemplified by the metaphor of using colors. Based on this, we aim to provide a palette of colors – to guide our understanding of an ‘Organization at Play’. This will consequently help us in our empirical tests, in which we aim to find indications for our understanding of play, as well as the model’s durability, to eventually analyze and interpret on mechanisms that hold playful organizations together.

#### 4.1.1 THE COLORS OF PLAY (Playing with Theory)

*"The most irritating feature of play [...] is not the perceptual incoherence as such, but rather that play taunts us with its inaccessibility. We feel that something is behind it all, but we do not know, or have forgotten how to see it."*

(Robert Fagen, 1981, in Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 2)

##### 4.1.1.1 A World in Its Own

*"Play is our saviour from dualism [ - ] [wo]man is 'only fully a human being when [she/] he plays."*

(Schiller, 1982: 107 in Monthoux, 2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000, p. 38)

As we mentioned earlier, definitions of play all face the problem that "play is a liminal, in-between phenomenon: A child playing 'cops-and-robbers' is both a robber and not a robber at the same time" (Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 2). But, by simultaneously embodying the role of the robber and the non-robber, what exactly is the child then? Contemplating on this controversy in play, Schiller (1982 in Monthoux, 2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000) proposes the concept of *Schwung*: a 'faculty of bending' 'form' and 'matter', which results from what Schiller calls the 'play-drive'. By 'bending' (manipulating) 'form' and 'matter', play thereby creates its own world in-between reality and fantasy. From this notion, Schiller argues that "play is our savior from dualism" (Schiller 1982 in Monthoux, 2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000, p. 31); Instead of forcing us to decide whether the child is a robber or not, play is this magic space which allows the child to be both simultaneously.

Multiple scholars within the field follow Schiller's thought to perceive play as a special 'world in its own'. Victor Turner (1969) describes play as "liminal" or "liminoid," which means that it occupies a space between what he calls reality and unreality (in Sutton-Smith, 2001). Andersen (2009) writes that play "represents a distinct communicative doubling machine. According to him, play doubles the world so that we have a world of play and a real world, and the doubling takes place on the side of play" (p. 80); Play thus suspends the rules of the actual world (Andersen, 2009) - making what happens impossible to control.

This world in its own, in-between reality and fantasy, a world where the 'rules of the actual world have been suspended' (Andersen, 2009), is a very distinct feature of play. In the following, we will see that from an individual level this world allows its player to utilize one's

creativity and imagination to bend meaning. In this world, abstract and diverse thinking flourishes and players are 'free' to experiment, explore, and test things out which otherwise perhaps would not have been tested. In this world, failure leads to learnings and as the play continues, these learnings transform the play itself without our intentions impacting them - a sequence which promotes trials and errors.

From an organizational perspective, Andersen (2009) writes that this 'world of its own' self-doubles the organization so that there is an organization which is 'played into existence' and an organization which has been 'decided'. In this world, what the organization is, is what 'is at play' and the conversation between these two systems, the 'playing' one and the 'decided' one, represents a cycle of productive disturbances constituting the 'at play' state of constant transformation (Andersen, 2009). In his theory, the 'playing' system, is the one which produces new virtual possibilities, while the 'decided' organization fixates these possibilities (Andersen, 2009).

This aspect of play also represents an entrepreneurial potential for organizations as "the in-between (the entre-) can be understood as the condition for entrepreneurship to emerge" (Hjorth et al., 2018, p. 159). The creation of this in-between requires a departure from binary concepts of either or. In an entrepreneurial context, Hjorth et al. (2018) captures this necessity with his concept of a 'yellow light' understood as an undecided state in-between 'yes' and 'no' which nurtures and anticipates what something could become. Like we saw in the example of a child being a robber and not a robber at the same time, play can serve a vital role in the creation of this 'entre' (yellow light) by saving us from 'dualism' through bending form and matter (Schiller, 1982 in Monthoux, 2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000).

Rather than confining to binary options (yes or no) play's 'world in its own' thus is a space for spectrum thinking where meaning is fluid. Play's relationship to entrepreneurship can thus be understood as a form of space maker which facilitates and encourages recombination.

Thus, the 'color' of a 'world in its own' in which the 'rules of the actual world have been suspended' (Andersen, 2009) makes room for spectrum thinking (the in-between) in which entrepreneurship can emerge.

#### 4.1.1.2 Meaning

What things 'mean' and how things are 'given meaning' is a topic which has been discussed for centuries. Immanuel Kant is famous for his concept 'das Ding an sich', a concept of divine truth beyond human understanding (Monthoux, 2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000). Monthoux (2000) exemplifies how Kant's ideas are later reinterpreted by Schopenhauer: "All living humans, by the mere fact that they are themselves subjects of will incarnated in physical bodies, have innate access to the space of a-thing-in-itself. In Schopenhauer's opinion, Das Ding is far from mysterious and unreachable. As we are all 'Ding an sich' we are potentially able to reconstruct 'das Ding an sich' by contemplating our own human existence. Instead of hopelessly trying to reach some truth outside ourselves, and then bring it home by means of communication, inside contemplation can help us tap truth flowing out of our own source" (p. 38).

This means that things do not inherently own/ entail meaning itself, but that it is us who construct and give things meaning based on our individual experiences. Hall (2000) further argues that meaning is produced and a result of a semiotic 'signifying practice' of sense-making, which he refers to as 'representation', which consists of a 'conceptual system' (conceptual maps) and a 'language system' — using 'codes' to fix the relationship between 'concepts' and 'signs'.

To understand meaning as constructed, also implies that meaning likewise can be taken apart, 'deconstructed'. If we quest to create 'the new' we can force ourselves to depart from the current 'status quo' by systematically taking away the concept and signs used in our sense-making process (Hall, 2000). Descartes puts forward such a systematic loss of meaning with his idea of 'detachment' (Spinoza et al., 1999). To Descartes, detachment exists in three aspects: "detachment from seeing all the relevant interconnection, detachment from passion, and detachment from our traditions and habitual forms of life" (Spinoza et al., 1999, p. 6).

To tamper with meaning (play with meaning) is a core feature of and 'Organization at Play'. What keeps the organization running is that it constantly creates new meaning and this is enabled through its players who need to utilize their creativity and imagination to 'detach themselves' and create 'new worlds' by making present absent or making absent present.

#### 4.1.1.3 Seriousness

*“Play is a thing by itself. The play-concept as such is of a higher order than is seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness.”*

(Huizinga, 1949, p. 45)

The notion of seriousness is perhaps one of the central topics in the discourse of play in organizational context. In this section, we emphasize that play is paradoxically serious and unserious at the same time (Huizinga, 1949): When observing children play shopkeepers, vigorously selling wooden fruits to their parents, we can observe that play can be very serious indeed. Contrary to how the business world majorly has perceived work as serious, and play as unserious, Huizinga (1949) does not see the contrast between play and seriousness as fixed, but rather as fluid.

In our overview about the application of play in organizational theory, we talked about how serious play in organizational context mostly seems to be seen as “engine for business” (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011) and thereby denies its origin, what Huizinga (1949) described as the seriousness of ‘true’ play. Based on our distinction of play and games, we would identify most of the play going on in businesses as ‘games’, designed to serve a particular purpose, something that can be controlled and used when necessary. These games are not play as they do not entail the ambiguity and openness towards possibilities laying beyond the game itself, play in its ‘true’ form entails. Play may incorporate rules and boundaries, but play can challenge these rules at any moment, taking the play on an adventurous journey towards new possibilities beyond ‘the planned’.

Designing or planning a specific purpose or motivation for play, therefore, limits play in its ‘true’ form and the adventurous journey towards new possibilities beyond ‘the planned’. In the following, we will elaborate on ‘true’ play’s other implications.

To move forward and drive change in organizational contexts does often require asking questions that are uncomfortable and might challenge the status quo. To ask these ‘tough’ or ‘silly’ questions about a very serious matter may often be hard, but if we are ‘just playing’ we may create an environment with the necessary psychological safety for the individual to start asking these questions (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2011). Allowing for the space in-between the real and unreal by encouraging to look at something as ‘just play’, allows us to depart from meaning and create new meaning simultaneously (Huizinga, 1949).



Moreover, based on existing literature, we know that business and management is highly linked to social sciences (in fact, it is about people; Furnham, 2005), as they essentially seek to understand and fulfill human needs (e.g., Osterwalder et al., 2014). By embracing play's unserious nature (the paradoxical meeting of the real and the unreal), may not only help business create a safe space for people to engage and thrive in (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2011) – a space where 'silly' questions are promoted – but also enable a business to imagine entire new worlds of human needs not yet existing. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) famously said: "If people never did silly things, nothing intelligent would ever get done." Thus, it sometimes takes a 'stupid question' to discover or create something 'genius'.

This notion moreover points to another interesting discourse, being that what is beneficial or 'of value' to business and individuals is not necessarily always what is 'serious'. Especially in business, people regard measures that aim towards efficiency as something serious. Indeed, working efficiently towards defined objectives is still the dominant principle to create value. Businesses thereby tend to equal efficiency with seriousness, which is why play – which by the majority is still wrongly perceived as merely something 'unserious' - got marginalized within organizational theory as well as business practices (Kavanagh et al., 2011).

We can thus say that "organizational play, which in essence does not differ from play in general, is a much richer phenomenon than the notion of serious play suggests" (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011, p. 94), and can open up great new perspectives and opportunities for organization if not reduced to a means-end-logic that is foreign to play itself (Ibid.).

#### 4.1.1.4 Community

*"My formula for utopia is simple: it is a community  
in which everyone plays at work and works at play.  
Anything less would fail to satisfy me for long"*

(Richard Burke, 1971, p. 47)

With this evangelical exclamation, Burke (1971) ended his discussion of work and play. What he is addressing about community here, aligns with the already introduced theory of Andersen (2009); A playing state of the organization, in which difference is celebrated and the number of possible different 'virtual' states, in which the organization can confidently exist, increases.

Andersen (2009) called this playful organizational structure 'Communitas Lundens' (playing community), inspired by Huizinga's (1949) 'Homo Ludens' (playing human). Huizinga (1949) furthermore, argued that we should treat play seriously as it is elementary to the human (and animal) condition. To Huizinga (1949), religion, sports, war and arts are all forms of play, and play is therefore the essence of civilization (culture).

With the expression 'Communitas Lundens', Andersen (2009) wants to emphasize that all play happens in community. The answer to which 'force' keeps the playful structure alive and keeps up the conversation is thus, according to Sandelands (2010), found in this community.

*"A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. Of course, not every game of marbles or every bridge – party leads to the founding of a club. But the feeling of being "apart together" in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game."*

(Huizinga, 1949, p. 12).

From Sandelands' (2010) communal perspective, play could thus be seen as a form of 'sharing life with others'. However, we would argue that community can also be found in an individual who plays. Just as an 'Organization at Play', it is a 'force' that keeps together the dynamic tension of division and unity (Sandelands, 2010), which enables to jump between the reality and virtual, letting us endure the already mentioned in-between element of play. Thus, we "can find play in the spaces in between, too, as children engage imaginary friends without quite being alone or as gamers play together on the Internet without meeting face-to-face" (Eberle, 2014, p. 214). The conversation that players have in between multiple parts might, therefore, be with another person or with the virtual part of oneself; Play is thus "an open-ended dialogue with oneself and the community" (Vivian Paley in Eberle, 2014, p. 220).

This means that play can be solitary or social (Eberle, 2014), but community keeps the playful structure alive. Aligned with this, Sandelands (2010) claims that play is not about the individual but the whole of the human community it is part of.

#### 4.1.1.5 (Love), Empathy & Synchrony

The fundamental ‘force’ that keeps communities together is what Sandelands (2010) further identifies as ‘love’. In his theory, love is defined as the “dynamic tension between the division and unity of human being. It is the simultaneous movement toward unity across differences (e.g., as persons or groups seek to overcome the differences that separate them) and movement toward differentiation within unity (e.g., as persons or groups seek to maintain their identities in their bond)” (Ibid., p. 77).

In an ‘Organization at Play’, a play-community (Huizinga, 1949), everyone is equally responsible for the balance of unity and differentiation. The love between the players, or the members of the community (e.g., employees in an organization), is what keeps the group together, so that new ideas, possibilities, and opportunities that emerged through play undertaken in the organization, still fit the community (organization) as a whole.

In fact, much of the pleasure we get through play is of social nature. Play strengthens our social skills (Eberle, 2014) by making us better prepared for social circumstances: “It is education of public self” (Ibid., p. 217). Just as animals learn how and when it is the right time to fight through play in their young age (Brown, 2010), children learn how to socially interact while playing with their peers (Sutton-Smith, 2001). These social interactions and their equal participation in securing the balance of unity and tension are very difficult to explain for the individuals involved and even harder to observe. Nevertheless, there is a fascinating level of synchrony, which is made possible by love’s ability to hold the community together (Sandelands, 2010). An example of synchrony in play would be how jazz musicians improvise a new piece of art on the fly. Another example even more ordinary, which can reveal astonishing anticipations and coordination, is a supper conversation with friends (Brothers, 1997 in Sandelands, 2010). These valuable skills that all interlace into the element of play not only allow for social interactions (such as musicians playing together) but are also learned through play.

These emotional and intellectual bonuses, which enlarge not only our capacity for insight but also the talent for empathy (Eberle, 2014), are especially relevant in the context of how to create and set up an organization. To create ‘the new’ requires a deep understanding of the people you create for, their needs, and how they experience the world. This also refers to what Max Weber (in Huff, 1984) calls the ‘empathy-as-knowledge’ approach, which distinguishes empathy as a certain type of knowledge and manifests in terms of ‘what feels right’. The relevance of empathy moreover applies to the people one works with, right up to institutional entrepreneurship, where mobilizing people implies a high level of empathy with potential allies

(Fligstein, 1997 in Battilana et al., 2009). It is in this context, where we therefore would like to propose ‘empathy’ as another feature of an ‘Organization at Play’ (Andersen, 2009), interpreted by Sandelands’ (2010) defined force that holds the community together, which is ‘love’.

Thus, we would argue that empathy, which is defined as the “ability to understand and share the feelings of another” (Lexico Oxford Dictionary, 2020), is the force that holds the ‘Organization at Play’ (Andersen) together and substitutes the mere functioning over control. It is an ability that most people seem to lack nowadays but can be strengthened through and used in play.

In the following, we will see that ‘empathy’, comprises much more than just the idea of ‘love thy next’. Play is indeed also about being aware and sensitive with oneself.

#### 4.1.1.6 Self-Awareness

*“The infant begins to become self-aware, recognizing its own capacity for destruction, its vulnerability and limitations, as it begins to accept rather than deny the complexity of the external world. Crucially, the process of splitting is mitigated, both internally and externally, through recognizing that ‘mother’ is constituted by, inter alia, a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ breast.”*

(Kavanagh, 2011, p. 338)

Play with others indeed requires sensitivity and mutuality, but so does play require to be sensitive with oneself. The state where the infant begins to become self-aware marks, according to Bion (1961/1998), the beginning of a constant discourse with oneself, splitting into introjection and projection (in Kavanagh et al., 2011), creating the own world of reality and virtual for oneself, where “states broadly equivalent to the paranoid-schizoid, the depressive and manic positions may be identified” (ibid., p. 40). According to Stern (2006) and Malloch & Trevarthen (2009), one body houses multiple persons (multiple identities) both in time and space (in Fagen, 2010):

*“You don’t have to be a coherent person and have a single identity. You’re a patchwork piece of reality, and the thing is to accept that.”*

(Daniel Stern remarking Jerome Robbins (Vaill, 2006, p. 500) in Fagen, 2010, p. 19)

The core sense of self is therefore to be found in aware and sensitive engagement with oneself in space and time, which happens in play. According to Stern (1977, 1985, 2004 in Fagen, 2010), this sensitive engagement consequently helps these embodied minds to be 'intersubjectively open' to build relationships with other minds through synchrony and attunement, which relates back to 'empathy'.

As play is moreover deeply and intrinsically linked to imagination, Kavanagh et al. (2011) argue, that through play, new forms of individual and identity can be, or even must be, imagined. Play could thus be a window to challenge or even break out of one's own identity.

This 'embodied mindset', the possibility to step out and engage with oneself which can be found in play, is particularly important in organizations, in which it is essential to pivot and change constantly due to the rapidly changing environment.

#### 4.1.1.7 Flow

*"Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement. It is kind of feeling after which one nostalgically says: "that was fun," or "that was enjoyable." It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future."*

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 43)

How we experience flow illustrates the "intensity of, and absorption in, play" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 2). Someone who experienced this sensation knows about the uniqueness of this element and thus might guess how difficult it is to find an explanation for it. One of the central contributors to the flow element in play is Csikszentmihalyi (2009 in Plessis, 2018), who researched "peak", or "optimal" experiences of dancers, players, rock climbers, surgeons, and artists. They all defined these specific peak experiences "[...] in very similar terms, which Csikszentmihalyi collectively calls 'flow'" (Plessis, 2018, p. 123), or others, for instance in positive psychology, describe as 'getting into the zone' (Petelczyc et al., 2018) or 'in the groove' (Kavanagh et al., 2011). "Activities that create flow generally require some level of skill, involve a limited stimulus field, result in a loss of self-consciousness, give one a sense of control, and

contain noncontradictory demands and unambiguous feedback” (Abramis, 1990 in Petelczyc et al., 2018, p. 172).

If there is one point on which the diverse spectrum of thinking around play, from the classical literature such as Huizinga (1949) and Caillois (1957), to the more contemporary such as Sutton-Smith (1999) and Andersen (2009) seem to agree, it is the notion that play entails some form of ‘losing yourself in play’. Which, in turn, is reflected in the concept for the experience, which we just introduced as concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

Play in organizational context could thus be understood at the point where work and play start to merge, where the boundaries between these two concepts are blurring (Burke, 1971) and not only co-exist (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011). A stage of being ‘in the zone’ or ‘in flow’, in which learning and acquiring new skills happen effortlessly (Petelczyc et al., 2018), and where work does not feel like work anymore but is in fact play.

#### 4.1.1.8 Freedom

*“First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it. By this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off from the course of the natural process.”*

(Huizinga, 1949, p. 7)

Freedom is another key feature of play in organizational context. The discourse of freedom in play departs from Huizinga’s (1949) claim that play is voluntary. Neither the initiation of play, the way how play evolves, nor the outcome of play can thereby be forced, i.e., ‘controlled’. While games are often designed to serve a specific purpose, play is free. Play’s voluntary nature means that play does not serve anyone or anything else but play itself (Huizinga, 1949). Andersen (2009) describes this with the statement: “What is special about play is that it originates in itself, which also means that play cannot be controlled by the intentions of its players” (p.76). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) contributes to this view with the concept of play’s ‘autotelic’ nature, meaning that play entails its own telos and own rewards. We play simply because we want to play, and play exists simply to serve play. Describing the notion that play only serves itself, Huizinga (1949) writes: “To presuppose the utility of play from the start is to

be guilty of a *petitio principii*<sup>1</sup>. Child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom” (p. 8).

Freedom is also a key element in Derrida’s (1972) discourse on the concept ‘free-play’. His point is that meaning is never fixed but always ‘in play’ since play creates its own semiotic system where meaning is constantly moving. To play freely thereby entails bending meaning. By leaving the ‘rules of the actual world’ behind (Andersen, 2009), free play is a stage of mind open to endless possibilities. In this world, the meaning of things is fluid; Things may not be what we normally think of them; In play, a wooden stick can become a deadly sword, in the next second, a magic wand.

For an ‘Organization at Play’, this means that you cannot plan or control the outcome of play. Play entails an unforeseeable purpose, its own ‘telos’, own ‘rewards’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Play does not have a single specific predefined purpose; Play is much more like art than a science; being purposeful without having a predefined purpose (Holquist, 2003, p. 368 in Styhre and Erikson, 2008, p. 48 in Strauß, 2017 p. 37).

This stands in contrast to organizational functioning as it is today, where the purpose and strategic objectives are predefined and considered as fixed, and which represent the center of all strategic decisions. An ‘Organization at Play’ therefore needs to re-think and allow for a constant conversation of the firm’s purpose that continuously evolves. Thus, the “re-thinking” that happens is learning how to interpret the outcome of the play. Contrary to trying to plan or control the outcome in advance, this can open up many new opportunities for change.

#### 4.1.1.9 Creativity & Imagination

*“I am subject to a divine or supernatural experience... It began in my early childhood – a sort of voice which comes to me; and when it comes it always dissuades me from what I am proposing to do.”*

(Socrates as reported in Plato’s ‘Apology of Socrates’, around 399 BCE)

The relationship between creativity, imagination, and play has been studied and connected by various scholars. While Freud (1908) studied the connection between child’s play, phantasy and creativity, Vygotsky (1978) noted that: “the preschool child enters an imaginary, illusory

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<sup>1</sup> Assuming the conclusion (English translation)

world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call play” (p. 93). What these authors noticed was that through exercising creativity in play, a ‘new world’ can be imagined and realized.

In organizational settings, the connection between play, imagination and creativity at least goes back to Schiller (1759–1805) and his ideas of *Spieltrieb* in which he notes: a “[wo]man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he [/she] is a [wo]man, and he [/she] is only completely a [wo]man when he [/she] plays” (in Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 21). The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who had built his ideas on authors like Huizinga and then described play’s autotelic nature, also connected play and creativity. While doing so, he thereby shone light on adults’ ability to play, distancing himself from the perception of “play as a means through which children (and young animals) learn and practice adult behaviors” (Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 22). Moreover, two authors Mainemelis & Ronson (2006) arrived at the conclusion to perceive play as ‘the cradle for creativity’.

The term ‘creativity’, as we know it today, is a rather recent phenomenon, entering the discourse in the middle of the 20th century. However, we can trace early thinking about creativity to Plato (Ion), who defines this undefinable state as a kind of madness. Moreover, Monthoux (2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000) describes how creativity to Kant “is a matter of divine grace, a deistic quasi-mystery, the mastering or managing of which it would be sheer heresy” (p. 35). Kant is thereby connecting the concept of creativity to imagination. Today, creativity is typically defined as “the generation or production of ideas that are both novel and useful” (George, 2007, p. 441). However, this definition has been subject to criticism for asking; What is meant by ‘novel’? And ‘useful’ to whom? Thus, De Cock et al. (2013) argue for a more holistic understanding of creativity as: “a matter of ‘going beyond’, of exploring that which might be not so obvious and clear-cut and of challenging the taken-for-granted” (p. 221). Thus, an understanding of creativity, which is closely connected to imagination.

Imagination is a concept which has been discussed ever since Aristotle who proposed *phantasia* (De Cock, 2016). Modern philosophers have developed the understanding of imagination as a — ‘presence-in-absence’ — the act of making what is present absent and what is absent present (Ibid.). Today, imagination is therefore not only seen as “a precondition for reason” (Ibid., p. 238), but also as “emphatically linked to the capacity to question the existing and the given” (Ibid., p. 240).

Taking on De Cock et al.’s (2013) understanding of creativity as ‘matter of going beyond’, as well the dual-nature of imagination, we can see that both concepts highly thrive in



play. Our creative and imaginary abilities to make present absent, or make absent present is what allows play to create a world of its own and to exist in (embody) multiple versions at the same time, the reality and virtual (Andersen, 2009); At the same time, play makes creativity more imaginative (Vint, 2005).

### Children Vs. Adults

As mentioned earlier, in today's knowledge economy (Florida, 2011), creativity has become something both desirable and obligatory (Reckwitz, 2017), as creativity is increasingly recognized as critical means for organizations to create meaningful, lasting value (George, 2007). The paradox here is that the system wants us to be creative (Reckwitz, 2017), while at the same time, the fundament the system is built on (control) is preventing us from being creative. This is confirmed by Bohm (2004 in Burnard et al., 2016), who argues that today's society, with its underlying 'governmental rationalities' directed towards businesses working efficiently, has taught us to have a conformist, imitative, mechanical state of mind. A paradox of people being expected to 'think and play like a child, but act like an adult'.

*"What a queer planet!" he thought. 'It is altogether dry, and altogether pointed, and altogether harsh and forbidding. And the people have no imagination. They repeat whatever one says to them . . . On my planet I had a flower; she always was the first to speak . . .'"*

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (2010), The Little Prince

But how come that, in regard to creativity, imagination, and play, we make that distinction between children and adults at all? Why is it that children are referred to being more creative than adults? This leads us to the question of whether adults lose their creative and imaginative abilities or if adults just unlearned how to utilize these? It is indeed no phenomenon that children are more creative than adults. While we can observe almost unlimited creativity and imagination in children's 'free play', there are some who argue that adults simply lost their ability to be creative or imagine.

The research studies conducted by George Land in 1968, which studied the creativity level of children compared to the creativity test devised to test and select potential innovative engineers and scientists for NASA, clearly demonstrated that creativity is unlearned over time (Land & Jarman, 1993):

<b>Age Group Tested</b>	<b>Number Tested</b>	<b>Years of Testing</b>	<b>% Who Scored in 'Highly Creative' Range</b>
<b>5 Year-Olds</b>	1,600 Children	1968	98%
<b>10 Year-Olds</b>	1,600 Children	1978	30%
<b>15 Year-Olds</b>	1,600 Children	1983	12%
<b>25+ Year-Olds</b>	280,000 Adults	1985	2%

*Table 4: Land Research Creativity Level, own illustration based on Land & Jarman, 1993, p. 20*

While the creativity and imagination in children are more originate, what differentiates us from children, is that “we start to filter everything we see, just like a polarized lens that lets in only light that is aligned one way” (Vint, 2005, p. 20), based on our individual experiences and beliefs. This consequently prevents adults from the unconventional, the ‘going beyond’ (De Cock et al., 2013), leaving us with the sole ability to re-create (Kavanagh et al., 2011).

This is where play ‘comes into play’. As elaborated earlier in how we can detach from meaning through play, ‘true’ play is what can enable not only children but also adults, to step beside themselves and leave rationality behind, to free themselves from themselves. Through play, we can thus depart from reason, as a precondition (De Cock, 2016, p. 238) for creating ‘the new’, thus learn again how to let creativity and imagination unfold freely, just like children.

Creativity and imagination for an ‘Organization at Play’ (Andersen, 2009) can thus mean to open up the organization for re-interpretation. To put the organization ‘at play’, the organization can ‘go beyond’ what it currently is, challenge the taken for granted and explore new opportunities - by making absent present, or make present absent.

Moreover, instead of engaging in pre-scripted play that fulfills the demands for control, ‘true’ play opens up the ‘world in its own’; A space for the players’ creativity and imagination to unfold, and thereby offering a way for how to detach from meaning and create something truly ‘new’ rather than ‘re-create’.

#### 4.1.1.10 Lostness

Since we have already described the aspect of 'flow', moreover, it is to mention that play entails a natural stage of 'lostness', of 'losing yourself in play'. Building on the work of Gadamer (1985), Andersen (2009) writes that play "frees itself from subjective intentions behind the play by providing its players with the opportunity to forget them-selves in play" (p. 76).

'Letting go' indeed is an important element in this process of allowing yourself to get lost in play. Just like Plato writes that a poet is "never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him" (Ion 534b3-5). Players must step 'beside themselves' and leave seriousness (all rationalities) behind to lose themselves in play entirely.

Something is fascinating about 'being lost'. Of losing orientation, and, in fact, yourself — at least just momentarily. In our discourse on how play challenges how we understand organization and organization creation, we can see that lostness holds a strong connection to the entrepreneurial ideal of an actor who is creating 'the new.' We know from Schumpeter (1944) that the entrepreneurial value is found in entrepreneurs' ability to depart from meaning and their ability to challenge and potentially destruct the status quo, our current state of understanding. To create something radically new, Norman & Verganti (2014) argue that: "radical product innovation is driven by either advances in technology or a deliberate change in the meaning of the product" (p. 81). To change the meaning of a product, we therefore must play and thereby bend 'form' and 'matter' (Schiller, 1982 in Monthoux, 2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000).

Our argument is that an 'Organization at Play' is a form of 'lost world' in its own'. This 'lost world in its own' represents the entrepreneurial potential for an 'Organization at Play', as it is in this, *dérive*, people and their organizations find their power to transform and actualize the new. To actualize the new, we believe, requires a 'getting lost' in-between what Hjorth (2014) calls the 'actual' and the 'virtual'. It is here where we are open to new opportunities. To play entrepreneurially, individuals as well as their organizations, must dare to 'get lost' to purposely detach themselves from their norms, passions, traditions, and habitual forms of life (Spinoza, 1999).

As we are used to the ideal of 'being in control', many of us think of the idea of 'getting lost', or stepping out and questioning 'identity', as a horrifying experience. For this reason, play's nature as a 'doubling machine' (Andersen, 2009) represents a powerful way of 'coping' with this experience; It creates a secure space that allows us to get lost, and feel good about being lost, as we are 'just playing'.

#### 4.1.1.11 Fun & Boredom

*"So far so good, but what actually is the fun of playing? Why does the baby crow with pleasure? Why does the gambler lose himself in his passion? Why is a huge crowd roused to frenzy by a football match?" This intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play."*

(Huizinga, 1949, pp. 2-3)

According to Huizinga (1949), it is precisely the fun element of playing, which characterizes the essence of play. It resists all logical analysis or interpretation, which again highlights that the 'matter' of play cannot be reduced further. Observing how young dogs are playing with each other, how they pretend to be terribly angry, but still are following the rule to 'not bite your sister's ear', illustrates the most pure forms of play (Huizinga, 1949); What is most important "in all these doings [is that] they plainly experience tremendous fun and enjoyment" (ibid., p. 1). However, there are various other (more developed) forms, such as in contests, dance performances, or increasingly in work settings, that kindle fun in players.

This deep pleasure element of play, which is so hard to control and make sense of, is certainly the reason why play in work-context is very likely to be categorized and thus reduced to a form of unserious activity. What is misunderstood here is, as elaborated earlier, that an 'Organization at Play' is not "just a way of working, or just a way of having fun. Play opens the organization for critique and can even subsume 'serious' work under its own authority" (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011, p. 94). Nevertheless, there is still the discourse on how to combine non-goal-oriented activities (such as play) with today's functioning of businesses towards efficiency. And there is growing literature that tries to advocate the role of play through its very element of fun/ or pleasure.

This discourse is also reflected in Berlyne's (1960) theory of 'Stimulus-Seeking' behavior, which says that people seek to engage in play in order to experience this very pleasure and enjoyment in order to reach an optimum level of stimulation (Petelczyc et al., 2018). Individuals thus vary and regulate their stimulation level based on their current level of stimulus input. According to Starbuck and Webster (1991), this further means that people who experience a very low stimulus input (such as boredom), are more likely to engage in play than people who experience overstimulation (in Kavanagh et al., 2011).

This also illustrates again how play, which can result out of boredom, in turn, creates new meaning for the organization. According to Johnsen (2016), "boredom can be understood

as an experience of a loss of meaning, but also how this loss itself can be viewed as an imperative towards meaning that remains the source of new forms of organizing” (p. 1). The potential that Berlyne’s (1960) ‘Stimulus-Seeking perspective, as well as the discourse on meaning creation, holds, thus, was an important impetus for the role of play in organizational theory.

Indeed, the shift in the distinction of work and non-work we are observing today keeps up with the stream of research in organization and management studies, which is slowly moving towards that creative and productive workplaces should be playful and fun (Kavanagh et al., 2011). “This growing literature has prompted and reflected the incorporation of fun, frivolity and play into everyday working life, as exemplified by the popularity of team-building exercises, away days, dress- down days, office gyms, etc.” (ibid., p. 23). However, research on this is still theoretically light, not only due to the highly ambiguous character of play, which is difficult to study but also as most of the research is founded on not yet tested and untheorized assumptions (Owler et al., 2010 in Kavanagh et al., 2011).

Thus, “while play may retroactively be identified as instances of irony, resistance or fun, play is by virtue of its autotelic character beyond the intentions of such external goals” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975 in Kavanagh et al., 2011). This means that play is driven by different motives than work, as play is essentially an ‘end in itself’ (Huizinga, 1949; Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011). Nevertheless, an ‘Organization at Play’ might open up a new discourse, where the boundaries between work and play are blurring, where work can be a source for pleasure as well as play and is not merely perceived as ‘means to an end’; “Getting back to the ‘inner child’ can greatly help to put more joy into life, and especially into work” (Jacqueline Miller 1997, p. 255 in Andersen, 2009, p. 1). A place where people feel free to engage in playful activities when bored; Where “joyful colors, cartoons, jokes, toys, games, and music can help people to reactivate all the intelligence centers of the brain”, which can consequently lead to unforeseen creative solutions” (Ibid., p. 1).

#### 4.1.1.12 Cognitive Aspect of Play

*“In acknowledging play you acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter.”*

(Huizinga, 1949, p. 3)

When we talk about play and its function of in-between, it is inevitable to consider the human psyche as well. According to literature, play also has some influence on our mental health.

On the one hand, play has long been used in observation therapy: “Melanie Klein (1949) observed that in play the child expressed her or his fantasies and anxieties” (Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 24), which is why toys, according to Klein, always have strong symbolic meanings which are bundled with the child’s phantasies, experiences, and wishes. Observing how children play with toys and the kind of toys they are playing with, thus illustrated a way for her to get closer to the subconscious (Ibid., 2011). Donald Winnicott, Klein’s student, built on this idea and strongly emphasized that play is at the very heart of the development of a child’s psyche. A necessary part of this development, so Klein, is the ‘potential space’ where the infant can safely play (Ibid., 2011). This, in turn, results from the child’s distinction between ‘me’/ ‘not me’, a safe space that is created between the individual and the environment.

Sigmund Freud built most of the foundations for the study of play in therapy. For Winnicott, playing stretches up to other areas of adulthood as well (abstractions of politics, economics, philosophy and culture). It is the “third area, that of cultural experience which is a derivative of play” (Winnicott, 1971 in Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 25), which relates to Mitchell’s formulation that “mental health [...] lies in the subtle dialectical balance between illusion and reality” (Mitchell, 1986 in Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 25). This was thus a critique to Freud’s theory, who shared the association of work with the ‘reality principle’ and “associated play with wish fulfillment through fantasy, which was tolerable for children but inappropriate for adults” (Burke, 1971, Riesman, 1950 in Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 12).

Moreover, Petelczyc, et al. (2018) summarized a few theories that report on the cathartic nature of play, which suggest that play provides psychological relief and releases emotional tension. What previous conceptualizations of play described as this ‘in-the-moment’, fully absorbing and immersive attitude of play (see Huizinga, 1949; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), enables individuals “to experience some psychological distance from outside stressors and responsibilities” (Petelczyc et al., 2018, p. 169) and to simply better deal with stress (Sørensen & Spoelestra, 2011).

Next to coping with stress, Sørensen & Spoelestra (2011) argue for active social play to bring also advantages like mental and physical health. Aligning to play’s feature of fun, Butler

(2015) is arguing that humor and laughter, which is the expenditure of physical or psychical energy, can release nervous energy as well (in Petelczyc et al., 2018).

According to these authors, this feature of play can thus have important implications for the organization as well. Engaging in play can be “used to generate and regulate both psychological (e.g., to decrease stress and increase positive affect) and psychosocial (e.g., to increase liking and trust among employees) resources” (Sørensen & Spoelestra, 2011, p. 164), has been proven to have implications for employee’s well-being (DesCamp & Thomas, 1993 in Kavanagh et al., 2011) and to reduce stress (Sørensen & Spoelestra, 2011), without it being costly or damaging for any individual or the organization (Ellis, 1973 in Petelczyc et al., 2018).

#### 4.1.1.13 Movement

*“Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is ‘over’. It plays itself to an end. While it is in progress all is movement, change, alternation, succession, association, separation.”*

(Huizinga, 1949, p. 9)

As discussed earlier, there are many authors that describe the various properties of play. About which inherent feature most of them seem to align, is that play is about movement.

By looking at play in its ‘totality’ (Huizinga, 1949) as essentially an independent phenomenon (Gadamer, 1985 in Andersen, 2009), it becomes evident that movement has no goal, which brings it to an end. It rather “can be observed as ‘its own game’” (Andersen, 2009, p. 76).

Movement in play also happens in time and space. It is the constant jumping between reality and virtual, the movement forward and backward, what Gadamer defines ‘to-and-fro movement’, not directed towards an end state, but self-representative ([1960] 2004, in Corné du Plessis, 2018) and renews itself in constant repetition (Gadamer, 1985 in Andersen, 2009).

If play originates in itself and has no objective or designated end (Corné du Plessis, 2018), it “means that play cannot be controlled by the intentions of its players” (Andersen, 2009, p. 76). The seriousness in play is thus, as discussed earlier, to forget oneself (Ibid.) and be fully absorbed in play (Huizinga, 1949; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Corné du Plessis, 2018).

To conclude, we would argue that an ‘Organization at Play’ (Andersen, 2009), would stand for an organization that is in constant play, thus is constantly moving and changing (Kavanagh et al., 2011). Once the organization stops moving, the play is brought to an end, and vice versa.

#### 4.1.1.14 Order, (Self-Organization) & Aesthetics

*“Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it ‘spoils the game’, robs it of its character and makes it worth less. The profound affinity between play and order is perhaps the reason why play, as we noted in passing, seems to lie to such a large extent in the field of aesthetics. Play has a tendency to be beautiful. It may be that this aesthetic factor is identical with the impulse to create orderly form, which animates play in all its aspects.”*

Huizinga, 1949 p. 10

Considering that in play lies movement also implies that there is a curious temporary order within play (Kavanagh, et al., 2011). To say that it “has a beginning, an ending, and its own rhythm, grace and aesthetic” (Ibid., p. 2), means that play not only creates and demands order but that it is in itself order (Huizinga, 1949). Huizinga’s (1949) theory that play ‘plays itself out’ indicates that play, which is often ascribed and even felt to be chaotic, is in fact self-organized, as it defines temporality itself.

Here also lies a fascinating connection to the ‘Aesthetics of Organization’ (Monthoux, 2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000), a field that has been emerging, just as play, as a ‘matter of concern’ (Latour, 2004) by studying meaning, artifacts, tacit knowledge and cultures in organizations. Aligned with the study of play in organizations, this aesthetic approach goes beyond the mere notion of “beauty or elegance in the form, architecture or structures of organization” (Linstead & Höpfl, 2000 p. 1), moving in the spaces between the regulatory and experience, the reality and virtual (Monthoux, 2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000), which, we would argue, can happen through play. Both concepts therefore are challenging the ‘logic’ of organizational processes by problematizing the rational and solely analytical analysis of organizations (Strati, 1999 in Monthoux, 2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000), which we already referred to as ‘control’.

What Andersen (2009) distinguishes as the two-sided state of an ‘Organization at Play’, consisting of the ‘decided’ and ‘undecided’ system, Sutton-Smith refers to as ‘adaptive variability’, where one half of play is an emergent system, the other half self-organization



(Sutton-Smith, 1999 in Eberle, 2014). This idea of the whole system working in ‘functional relation’ was already theorized by Follett (1942 in Sandelands, 2010), who saw a successful organization as inherently self-generating, self-reinforcing, and self-adjusting coordination.

We thus can again say that play lies outside of control of the intentions of its players, due to its self-organizing and uncontrollable character. In turn, this self-organizing feature also is what allows for ‘functional relation’ (Follett 1942 in Sandelands, 2010) of the systems, the decided and undecided (Andersen, 2009). Acknowledging that organizational functioning can never be the motivation of play, as this would disrupt play’s autotelic nature (Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011), we would still argue that the self-organizing feature of play can have impetus on how we understand organization.

#### 4.1.2 SUM UP ACT TWO

In this Act, we synthesized existing definitions and features of play, which we would like to understand as a palette of ‘Colors of Play’ we may use to ‘paint’ our understanding of an ‘Organization at Play’ (Andersen, 2009). In the following second part of our analysis (Act Three), this palette further serves as a reference ‘model’ which allows for a conversation about how play challenges the way we understand organization and the logic of organizations. With this palette, we aim to point out especially the human aspects of play, such as community and empathy, as we feel these ‘colors’ (debate) is highly missing in context of organizational theory. While we learned about play’s inherent and deep connection to order and (self-) organization, we moreover could highlight it’s connection to entrepreneurship, as the ‘world in its own’, the in-between (the entre-), can be understood as the condition for entrepreneurship to emerge” (Hjorth et al., 2018, p. 159). A space, where the ‘yellow light’ (Hjorth et al., 2018) remains ‘yellow’ (-entre), due to the constant re-interpretation happening in play.

*“For those who are truly liberated, i.e. those who are free in spirit,  
work actually becomes play”*

Gordon Dahl (1972, p. 114 in Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2011, p. 84)

## **4.2 ACT THREE (Analysis, Interpretation & Indication)**

In this second part of the analysis, we aim to test our just synthesized 'Colors of Play' based on our four different cases, which we categorized in three different types (see section 3.3.2.2.). Instead of claiming to verify the model, we would rather call this analysis a way of 'indication' that is consistent with our desire to open an ongoing conversation in which we are not looking for 'final' definitions. We make use of the Burke's Pentad theory as a framework to dissect and interpret on the stories, as it helps us to take on different perspectives in the stories (Kneupper, 1979), as well as to discover the underlying meanings of actions in the bigger picture, playing the organization into existence.

Aiming to approach possible ways to understand the organization differently, we therefore look for the mechanisms that keep the organization together, not despite, but because they are 'at play'.

In the following, we will therefore present four different stories which we identified in the four interviews and analyze the ratios between elements that, we believe, disclose interesting connections. What we want to emphasize here, is that it is not important how the data is assigned to the different elements of the Pentad, but that we analyze the connection between, and use the elements to make our argument on where we see play happening. At the beginning of each case analysis, we introduce the organization, as well as tell about the interviewee's role in that organization. Upon request from the interview partners, all the names mentioned in this thesis have been anonymized and gender-neutralized (therefore, we use the gender-neutral pronoun 'hir').

#### 4.2.1 CASE STORY SerialFund LLC (Type A: Playful behavior expected)

(see Transcript 1)

**The SerialFund LLC Story:** How playing a game to bring electricity to developing countries can lead to an 'Organization at Play', if open-mindedness, curiosity, and dependencies are maintained.

##### **The Background**

Jaylen runs the organization SerialFund LLC which Jaylen refers to as a “bunch of techies”. The organization is currently involved in four different projects all of which primarily utilize new technology and the internet to actualize their projects. The project called Electricity Fund is currently his primary focus and, therefore, also the project that has been focused on in our interview. The Electricity Fund is partly a project of social entrepreneurship as it pools investment in solar micro-grids in Europe with projects in developing countries. Investments in developing countries often involve high risk for various reasons (e.g., corruption or local war), making it unattractive for investors. By pooling investments in Europe together with developing countries, Electricity Fund manages to compensate for the high risk related to investments in high-risk countries, as they are backed with more 'secure' investments through the stability in European markets. Serial Fund LLC thereby aims to make it more attractive for investors to invest in solar micro-grids in developing countries.

Although this might seem complex enough, Jaylen incorporates another rather unique approach in his work as Jaylen begins each new project by playing the game Le Grand Jeu with all stakeholders involved.

Le Grand Jeu is a game where each player is given a certain amount of resources to accomplish what they desire. Within the game, the players are either assigned a role or may represent themselves and their 'real life' motives and concerns. Jaylen describes how “players are encouraged to [...] bring in their perspectives and that's what makes the group open up quite early, and basically playing one round of Le Grand Jeu gets the people talking, opening up into this play mode because the scenarios also become **'fun'**. All of a sudden, there is a story that no one was planning on because anyone could build something. But mostly the people then create their own story from what they have built and how that works together [for the group as a whole.]” [00:18:34-00:19:19].

By playing Le Grand Jeu, Jaylen simulates potential future scenarios and thereby manages to create a conversation among the project's stakeholders regarding these topics.

By allowing them to share their incentives, desires, and concerns. Although we rather see Le Grand Jeu as a game than play, in the following, we will see how this activity constitutes a playful nature of Jaylen's organization, and how this can be the fundament for an organization to become 'at play'.

In the case of SerialFund LLC's Electricity Fund project, we identified the following elements with help of Burke's Pentad model:

**Act:** Establish solar powered micro-grids

**Scene:** Developing countries

**Agents:** All, Jaylen + team and stakeholders

**Agency:** Using technology to address the benefits and challenges of pooling solar micro-grid projects in Europe with projects in Africa through a game

**Purpose:** Make use of modern technology to improve lives in developing countries [Project Electricity Fund: bring electricity to everybody]

We would like to remind that our aim is not to allocate our data to certain elements of the pentad. In the following, we would rather present different selected 'dramatic ratios', that show interesting connections between the elements. The elements assigned in this selection therefore serve as a means to exhibit the case's story and make our argument where we see play happening. We will also see that the elements are exposed to constant changes precisely because of the ratios.

## **The Ratios**

### Agency to Scene

One of the main rhetoric challenges for Electricity Fund is to manage a conversation in which people (Europeans) who majorly take electricity for granted must convince people who have never lived with electricity about the benefits of a solar-powered electro micro-grid. This is often a difficult and complex task. To navigate within this challenge, Le Grand Jeu [agency] tries to simplify the issue as much as possible, Jaylen elaborates:

*"The mechanisms [of the game Le Grand Jeu] are very simple. But from those simple mechanisms, really complex decision making and complex interactions, value creation, value [streams] and [the] decision how these values should be distributed between the players [can be made]. This all happens, and people start talking, and*

*sometimes they become, or they are in the position of not themselves, but the other, for example.” [00:09:03-00:09:37]*

By playing Le Grand Jeu with their stakeholders, Jaylen encourages the players [agents] to approach the project in its totality, not solely from their own perspective. The simple mechanisms on which the game relies, make the complex topic comprehensible for all parties involved. Bringing electricity [act] to developing countries [scene] is a complex and serious task. However, by breaking the elements down into rather simple pieces, the game brings people [agents] in ‘eyesight’ and offers the players the opportunity of going beyond their own motives by adopting the motives and concerns of the other players as well.

Within this ratio, we can identify multiple ‘colors’ of play. The first aspect we can detect is ‘**seriousness**’. SerialFund LLC uses Le Grand Jeu with absolute seriousness, and the seriousness and complexity of the topic debated are likewise captured in the game. At the same time, the game bends seriousness, as it approaches the complex topic by breaking it down into simple and less ‘scary’ pieces, thereby looking at it “less serious”. This process ensures that everyone involved can understand the topic.

Furthermore, because everyone involved knows that playing Le Grand Jeu is “just a game”, a space is created in which players feel safe to ask ‘less serious’, perhaps even ‘silly questions’. Also, the process of finding answers to these at times diverse and unconventional questions, establish a high amount of mutual understanding between all stakeholders. Leading us to the identification of a second ‘color’ of play, which is ‘**meaning**’. What electricity is, how it is made, and what it can be used for, are questions often taken for granted, but a local community that has never lived with electricity does not share the same level of understanding about electricity as a concept. Le Grand Jeu therefore levels the playing field by carrying a rich conversation about every aspect of the project. Instead of adopting pre-defined meanings, the game serves as a way for players to create a shared ‘conceptual map’ (Hall, 2000) for meaning creation. A third ‘color’ of play ‘**empathy**’ thereby becomes a critical element of how SerialFund LLC plays and something the organization further requires of each player. To be part of SerialFund LLC (whether permanently or temporarily for a single project) players are required to consider not only their own objectives, motives, and concerns but also the objectives, motives, and concerns of everyone else involved. Empathy thereby secures a balance of unity and tension (Sandelands, 2010) within each of SerialFund LLC’s projects.

### Scene to Agency

In SerialFund LLC, the learnings about the developing countries [scene] obtained through playing Le Grand Jeu are allowed to influence the agency as well.

The way how [agency] the microgrids [act] come about, is adapted according to the needs of a specific local community [scene]. In some regions, strong allies and partnership with specific local authorities or local individuals or organizations which possess a high amount of power, may be crucial for successfully establishing a micro grid. These factors are often very hard if not impossible to identify with desk research, Jaylen explains:

*“There’s always the social and the inter-social layers where a lot of things happen and you don’t get that through a requirements list, or you don’t get that through meetings, hours and hours of meetings. But you might get it through a gamified version of what you’re trying to build or a game that you build together or play together that has your challenges on the table.” [00:28:26-00:29:01]*

We would argue that with this “gamified version” SerialFund LLC’s doubles existence (Andersen, 2009) into an actual version, and a simulated virtual version, a ‘color’ of play we see as a **‘world in its own’**. SerialFund LLC thereby simultaneously exists in multiple stages, a current ‘actual’ stage representing what and how the organization currently operates, and a ‘virtual’ (gamified) version of what and how the organization is aiming to operate.

Within the ‘world in its own’ where the ‘rules of the actual world have been suspended’ (Ibid.), playing the game Le Grand Jeu serves SerialFund LLC in two ways. Firstly, Le Grand Jeu is what allows SerialFund LLC to self-double its existence (Ibid.) and create the ‘world in its own’, what Jaylen calls the creation of ‘a gamified version’ of what the team is trying to build. Secondly, the game acts as an anchor point in this doubling for what otherwise may be a very abstract idea of a ‘gamified version’. Playing Le Grand Jeu thus makes the virtual “material”. This anchor point allows the players to share concrete ideas and perceptions of how they see and understand this abstract ‘virtual’ organization. By making the abstract ‘virtual’ concrete and comprehensible Le Grand Jeu thus makes it easier for everyone involved to actualize their part in making this ‘gamified version’ real.

In the game Le Grand Jeu we can identify the ‘color’ of play, **‘imagination’**, as all stakeholders use their imagination to make the ‘absent present’ in the process of developing potential future scenarios. By playing, these scenarios and dependencies among the stakeholders become visual, and can thereby be discussed, leading to a high level of mutual understanding. With this approach, Jaylen furthermore manages to create a sense of **‘community’**, as each party involved has a voice, and the playful setup requires everyone to listen to each other carefully.

### Scene to Act

Jaylen's story also includes elements of how the scene influences the act. The local community [scene] not only affects how [agency] SerialFund LLC delivers its product [act], the scene is also allowed to affect the product [act] itself. Jaylen explains how playing Le Grand Jeu brings vital knowledge about the local communities [scene] to SerialFund LLC. Jaylen thus uses the game as a way to:

*"... take a step back and see how we can involve, the people, the users of these solar microgrids as well, that they can decide themselves what is locally productive use, what is locally more value-creating for their communities and cultures..."* [00:13:28-00:13:53]

Instead of exporting a pre-designed product to a local community, Le Grand Jeu is a way for that community [scene] to voice their needs in a forum where all other stakeholders are listening and Jaylen, in turn, uses this information to design the best possible solution [act] for that specific community [scene].

### Scene to Agent

The element of the agent, in Jaylen's story, is also a rather fluid concept. In his own words, Jaylen calls his organization a "decentralized autonomous organization" [00:28:08-00:28:12]. Jaylen elaborates: "A firm is just a bunch of contracts. Now we can have them digital and decentralized running" [00:28:17-00:28:25]. Taking each individual scene into account, Jaylen brings together a team that is capable and has self-interest in executing the act (implementing solar-powered micro-grid) in this specific scene.

Jaylen's philosophy towards work is built on bringing people together who share a goal rather than 'forcing' people to work together solely based on economic gains. Jaylen thus uses the game Le Grand Jeu to identify these common interests and dependencies among the stakeholders in each project. Explaining how Jaylen perceives SerialFund LLC, Jaylen says:

*"I decided not to have a normal startup where you have founders and investors and employees, and you have this hierarchies at play. But really use what I see happening, namely that you can coordinate with anyone in the world who has an Internet connection and basically to have these ad hoc teams that have overlapping incentives or that have overlapping problems that they can solve by getting together for two weeks, two months or two years or just for three days in a Hackathon... to build a solution and then part their ways again."* [00:25:09-00:26:04]

The inherent temporality in how SerialFund LLC operates are comparable with the ‘color’ of play, ‘movement’. From Jaylen’s interview, it is evident that temporality and shared incentives are defining terms in describing how SerialFund LLC functions. Just like play “begins, and then at a certain moment it is ‘over’” (Huizinaga, 1949, p. 9), so does SerialFund LLC’s multiple projects always entail an end date. For each project, the SerialFund LLC brings a team of highly skilled people together around a shared goal. Once the goal is achieved, the team departs, the organization resets and finds a new team for the next project. The organization is thereby in a stage of constant movement.

### Agent to Act

Jaylen seems curious in mind and always open for a new opportunity. Jaylen tells us that the new opportunities that open up to him many times result from meeting new people. The people Jaylen meets influence and inspire him for new ideas for business ventures. Moreover, by being open towards ‘the new’, Jaylen gives room for these people to affect SerialFund LLC as well. Jaylen describes this openness as follows:

*“I find people who are working in the same niche through encounters, and then we either find what we want to work on very quickly, because they're talking and they're telling me what challenges them or what draws them. And I exchange that [as well]. And [we see if] there is an opportunity where we could work together” [00:31:53-00:32:22]*

Jaylen is clearly a person that has multiple projects running at the same time, and these projects are highly influenced by the various people [actors] Jaylen encounters. The way Jaylen allows for these encounters to affect SerialFund LLC can be compared to the ‘color’ of ‘freedom’ found in play. Jaylen keeps his organization free to play around with what it is, what it does [act], and how it operates [agency]. Much like how play entails an unforeseeable purpose and its own ‘telos’ and ‘rewards’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), so does Jaylen encounter the ‘new’, by keeping the organization open to new, unforeseeable opportunities.

### **Case 1 Conclusion**

Our analysis of how SerialFund LLC incorporates the game Le Grand Jeu into their work leads to the identification of two mechanisms that allow the organization to function. First ‘openness and curiosity’, which allow this ‘game mentality’ to ‘spill over’ and keep the organization ‘at



play'. Secondly, our analysis leads to the identification of 'dependencies' as the mechanisms which hold this playful structure together.

### Openness & Curiosity

SerialFund LLC is an organization that is set up for play. Not only does the organization's undertaking depart from a game, the playful mindset Jaylen talks about 'spills over' and influences how the organization operates. SerialFund LLC is open towards change and learnings obtained from playing Le Grand Jeu, are allowed to affect the 'what', 'how', and 'who' of the organization. The way SerialFund LLC plays Le Grand Jeu, thereby, leads to more play constituting an 'Organization at Play'.

The mechanisms which maintain SerialFund LLC 'at play' are openness and curiosity. While other organizations may be hesitant to change, SerialFund LLC, as a "decentralized autonomous organization" [00:28:08-00:28:12], embraces change and actively promotes 'movement'. The organization thereby constantly bends its own 'form and matter' (Schiller, 1982 in Monthoux, 2000 in Linstead & Höpfl, 2000), through which SerialFund LLC enables the organization to 'free' itself from itself and play around with what the organization is.

SerialFund LLC is thereby a very good example of how for an 'Organization at Play', is being played into existence by the constant movement within the ratios of Burke's Pentad. It is an organization which plays for a serious cause, while simultaneously playing around with 'seriousness', by playing a game in which all kinds of questions can be asked. An organization that balances unity and tension (Sandelands, 2010), thereby openly inviting for constant reinterpretation. Where players are encouraged to utilize their 'imagination' to make absent present or make present absent (DeCock, 2016) in their collective quest to create a 'gamified' – 'world in its own' in which players detach (Descartes in Spinoza et al., 1999) from personal perspectives and meet in eyesight by adopting the perspectives of the other players. The game Le Grand Jeu thereby requires players to be 'empathic' and step beside oneself ('self-aware') to find reason (Plato, Ion) by collectively creating 'meaning' (Hall, 2000), instead of implying meaning upon one another.

### Dependencies

Where openness and curiosity are the mechanisms that keep SerialFund LLC fluid, hence an 'Organization at Play'. The mechanism which holds SerialFund LLC's playful nature together - thereby balancing this openness - is dependencies rather than control. Playing 'Le Grand Jeu' makes everyone involved aligned on intent, finds a shared objective (goal), and maps out how everyone is dependent on each other to achieve this common goal. Everyone is thereby

incentivized not to harm any other party involved, as this simultaneously would be self-harm. Instead of commanding actions by the members of SerialFund LLC, Jaylen sets up SerialFund LLC from the perspective of how it can help support each member to accomplish their part (individual goal) in the process of fulfilling the collective goal within a 'community'.

#### 4.2.2 CASE STORY Scrabble LLC (Type B: 'Organization at Play' expected)

(see Transcript 2)

**The Scrabble LLC Story:** How giving 'guidance' for play and communicate in the in-between can set up, and in turn, are created by an 'Organization at Play'.

##### **The Background**

Scrabble LLC is a company that refers to itself as 'curators of change'. The organizations' vision is to transform the way how business and economy work into a more life-serving way again and promote a new way of work. To pursue this vision, they accompany and empower companies and individuals in their search for a new way of working towards a purpose, through consulting, think tanks, schools & training, magazines, and their Scrabble community. Starting with just a small group of people with paid memberships, Scrabble LLC decided to start an open Scrabble community around this topic, as more and more interested were approaching them to learn more about their vision. The Scrabble community today comprises employees of Scrabble LLC, active and former clients, consultants, field experts, entrepreneurs, and other interested minds, from various areas such as business, finance, arts, and education. With this community, Scrabble LLC's idea is to start a movement towards a new way of working.

We conducted the interview with the community manager Dominique. The following analysis will thus be based on information gathered mainly from the interview and from the Scrabble LLC's website (see Appendix (4)).

In the case of Scrabble LLC, we identified the following elements with help of Burke's Pentad model:

**Scene:** Organizational functioning, which is autonomous & self-organized / flexible

**Agent:** Community, all

**Act:**

- Power distributed across whole company
- Set up rules together
- Build up community
- Involve members
- Create transparency
- Knowledge transfer
- Cooperation

- Acting Pro-active

**Agency:**

- Communication work (slack, updates, meetings)
- Project planning model, working in circles
- Hierarchy model (no typical pyramid), working in circles
- Scrabble guidelines 'handbook'
- Dominique, Community builder

**Purpose:** Create a movement towards a new way of working

We would like to remind that our aim is not to allocate our data to certain elements of the pentad. In the following, we would rather present different selected 'dramatic ratios', that show interesting connections between the elements. The elements assigned in this selection therefore serve as a means to exhibit the case's story and make our argument where we see play happening. We will also see that the elements are exposed to constant changes precisely because of the ratios.

In this case, we talked to the community manager of Scrabble LLC, presupposing to identify aspects of an 'Organization at Play'. Aligned with the 'Colors of Play', we thus also will take a more meta view on the agents and play that is happening in the organization. This will help us interpret the mechanisms that hold this playful structure together. As we are interested in how agents can change the scene and vice versa, in this case, we identify the agents to be all the members of the community (all the agents).

We thus are particularly interested in the scene and the elements interacting and affecting the scene (the scene being what we believe to be an 'Organization at Play' in this case; A space that is set up for play (Type B)). Therefore, we will start analyzing the case by taking a closer look at what concrete actions and agency are influencing the scene and vice versa (scene-act ratio/ scene-agency ratio) before we look at the connection of the agent-scene ratio. Finally, we will interpret our findings regarding our previously described 'Colors of Play', in order to find parallels from our synthesized understanding of play.

## The Ratios

### Act (Agency) to Scene

“[Scrabble LLC is] setting this foundation so that at some point the community can work even more self-organized.” [00:30:00]

To create a space [scene] that eventually will be able to help agents to work self-organized themselves, [acts] that were most frequently mentioned in the interview were: to create transparency, knowledge transfer, cooperation/ working together, involve members, act pro-active, but also, setting up the rules together. According to Dominique, there are certain measures and tools [agency] how Scrabble LLC facilitates these acts.

Firstly, what comprises most of the efforts, is communication tasks, which include all forms of meetings (weekly alignment meetings, feedback meetings, clear the air meetings), online communication tools, updates, and blogs. Secondly, what is pointed out by Dominique is that the way their organization is structured is different from the more commonly hierarchical ‘pyramid models’. While the organizational pyramid is structured in different levels of authority and a vertical link between superior levels controlling lower levels of the organization, employees at Scrabble LLC are organized in flat hierarchies working autonomously in circles and roles. Instead of having a clear job description, the responsibilities are always distributed anew for every project based on the experience and strengths of the employee (which they refer to as circles). According to Dominique, this not only “distributes the power in the whole company” [00:10:11], but also creates self-organized and autonomous working circles, which are “always moving” [00:17:35]. This self-organized and autonomous way aligns with our understanding of the ‘color’ ‘movement’. Play, according to Andersen (2009), “can be observed as ‘its own game’” (p. 76), renewing itself in constant repetition (Gadamer, 1985 in Andersen, 2009). The autonomous character of play originating in itself (Corné du Plessis, 2018), is reflected in how the different circles ‘outplay’ their responsibilities on their own. This ‘self-organizing’ functioning again relates back to what Follett (1942 in Sandelands, 2010) describes as ‘functional relation’, seeing a successful organization as inherently self-generating, self-reinforcing, and self-adjusting coordination.

Dominique, who can be himself considered as means of the Scrabble LLC [agency] in order to ensure knowledge-transfer and build the community [act], moreover says:

“We kind of create the space and now people are connecting and helping each other and you can tell. Also like, the tone of how people talk with each other, it's very light and it's very warm and it's very nice and we get I get really good feedback from members.” [00:35:39][00:35:57]

Communication, as well as being pro-active in working together, was identified to be most critical to ensure that everyone is aligned on the process of the different teams and to know where help might be needed. We interpret that this communication task, as well as working collaboratively and pro-actively, allows for a ‘functional relating’ (Follett, 1942 in Sandelands, 2010) space, which is responsive for constant change (**‘movement’**). Moreover, it also creates a **‘safe space’**, in which people are supporting and working respectfully with each other and ‘play’; A space, in which people can engage and thrive (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2011), where **‘un-seriousness’** is appreciated (room for even silly questions), and where **‘creativity and imagination’** can flourish. For Dominique, play and creativity are thus “very connected”:

“For me it's very connected. Because for me, playing also kind of means to be creative.” [00:44:08][00:44:15]

“If I'm serious or worried, I can't be creative.” [00:46:06][00:46:08]

“I would be constantly worried and stressed at my workplace, I could never think like think of it further or like be creative at all. So I really couldn't even use my whole potential, you know?” [00:46:12][00:46:22]

### Scene to Act (Agency)

An organization that is always changing and moving has, in turn, also implications for the [act] and [agencies]. For Dominique, the very fact of self-organization and autonomy in circles affects Dominique by feeling even more involved, which consequently positively impacts his motivation towards work.

“So, I think, yeah. It might be sometimes a bit new, also very fast, to have a lot of responsibility. But I think it's very motivating because you always feel like you have a

lot of power about like a project or you're really like part of the outcome of something.”  
[00:26:15][00:26:35]

The ‘**freedom**’ that Scrabble LLC’s self-organizing functioning in circles brings must, according to Dominique, be distinguished from self-ruling.

“Because we work really freely and really flexible. It's also, of course, important that there's certain kind of like processes and rules that we set up together because of course it still needs to be like effective in the end.” [00:10:33][00:10:49]

According to Dominique, what holds the structure together is, therefore, not only done with communication and collaboration alone. Working in this flat hierarchy implies, in turn, certain rules. What Dominique stresses, though, is that these rules (or lessons-learned), which they call ‘Scrabble Guidelines’ are set up collectively to avoid in-effectiveness (aiming to assure that every mistake is only made once), thus serve like a handbook for everyone to know what is going on in the company.

In our investigation of the '**seriousness**' of play, we can thus analyze that the effectiveness of the game is not neglected; It also aligns with the unserious nature of play. However, this was one of the reasons why play, which is often misunderstood as inefficient and ineffective, got "marginalized" within both organizational theory and business practice (Kavanagh et al., 2011, p. 2).

*“Like in the first moment something does not have to be completed and thought through and make sense, but then pieces [...] can still come together, like things just come through the process. [...] So, yeah, I think for me it's very connected”*  
[00:44:30][00:44:39]

Scrabble LLC allows to re-think schemes and constellations within their system and supports a constant conversation of the firm’s purpose that continuously evolves. Based on Dominique’s description of their working processes, in this example, we want to further interpret the handbook as an outcome of their work (play). Instead of focusing on control, pre-defining the desired outcome in fixed objectives, we can see Scrabble LLC making use of the learning from their last play (handbook) as ‘outcomes of play’ to set the rules for the next play. Based on this outcome, Scrabble LLC further starts their new play (in circles), in which “things just come through the process” again. And it is in this play in which lies ‘**freedom**’, but also ‘**lostness**’. Supporting a structure (like circles) that enables to step beside oneself, leave all rationalities

to fully lose oneself in play, is where we identified to see the strong connection to the creation of 'the new'. In this space, players can depart from '**meaning**' (Schumpeter, 1944), which allows them to challenge the status quo and think of something radically 'new'.

### Scene to Agents

How the space influences the community is very much described in how Dominique describes the way Scrabble LLC works (and how it furthermore is formulated on their website):

"We work self-organized and we also eventually really want this to happen in our community." [00:07:36][00:07:43]

The Scrabble community is described as a 'heart project' by Dominique. Scrabble LLC does not make money with it, but they see connecting people and building this platform as input to start discussions about the topic to ultimately create a larger movement around new work through its community.

*"To face the questions of our time and to take the next step. That takes courage. The courage to venture into uncharted territory. Letting go of old habits and questioning yourself. You could also say: We help you to be brave."*

(Scrabble LLC Website, own translation, see Appendix (4))

The input that the space Scrabble LLC aims to give is to offer guidance and support around their philosophy of work and how to challenge not only the organizational functioning, which most companies are used to, but also to engage with oneself. The courage that it takes to "let go of old habits and questioning yourself" that Scrabble LLC is addressing in the quote above, again aligns with the idea of play being a window to challenge and break out of one's own patterns and identity, which illustrates that in play lies '**imagination**'; It requests you to be imaginative (aligned with Kavanagh et al., 2011). It, moreover, refers to the embodied mindset to be aware of and engage with oneself ('**self-awareness**'), in order to be intersubjectively open with others. This, according to Dominique, is achieved within Scrabble LLC by being "pro-active" [00:07:55] in working together, which relies on attunement and synchrony, thus '**empathy**' (Stern 1977, 1985, 2004 in Fagen, 2010), an aspect that can be learned through and creates play.



### Agents to Scene

What we can find in the interpretation that play might create a positive experience about the courage to question oneself and organizational functioning, is that this relationship can be found in the opposite direction as well, meaning how the agents change the [scene]. The motivation and positive experiences members of the community [agents] make on their own/ in their organizations, is what ultimately enriches Scrabble LLC's lessons learned (guidelines) and the support they can give to other members. Thus, it's members ultimately define how the space is structured and whether knowledge transfer happens or not. Dominique moreover gave one recent example of the current situation (COVID-19), and how the agents (in this case, the 'community') are impacting the organization:

*"Everything changed so much in last two weeks, but I think especially now – community – it is [...] more important than ever. [...] People share maybe projects and tips and whatever content they want to share [in] those times in the community because we are all [in the same situation]. Somebody created like a channel for remote work."*

[00:38:40][00:39:01]

### **Case 2 Conclusion**

In the case of Scrabble LLC, we analyzed how play can be seen on different levels and an organization which we would describe to be 'at play'. Also, we were able to identify that 'guidance' for play, being certain rules that are collectively set up and subject to constant change, enables the self-organized structure to work, thus 'facilitates' play.

### Self-organized but not self-ruling

We would argue to see an organization set up for play and where play and effectively working can merge. A 'safe space', in which it should be avoided to make the same mistake twice, while 'un-seriousness' and room to ask silly questions is appreciated and encouraged. It is a balance of autonomy ('freedom') and guidance to know where to put the next step of the way, in which direction it needs to be continued 'playing'. However, these guidelines are set up collectively and not imposed by one level of the hierarchy. As it is in constant motion ('movement') and 'self-organizing', the next outcome of play will play-itself out again, and so are the rules of the game constantly changing (Andersen, 2009).

Moreover, play can be seen in Scrabble LLC's purpose, to start a movement of a new way of working that Scrabble LLC aims to create; A vision that "we all unite and try to make how like

business and economy works and like a more life-serving way again” [00:05:42][00:05:50]. This implies being able to “let go of old habits and questioning yourself” [00:38:40] [00:39:01], which is uncomfortable for most of us, but playing may be a way to make it a positive experience. The possibility to get lost in play is moreover what allows us to play with ‘**meaning**’ and create ‘**new worlds**’ by making the absent present, in which ‘**imagination and creativity**’ can rise.

### Communicating within the elements

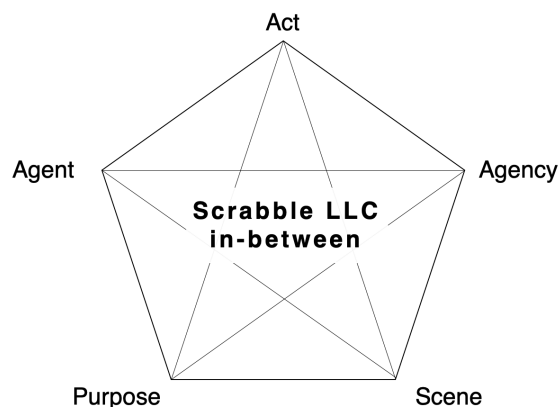


Figure 4: Scrabble LLC Communicating In-Between the Elements, own illustration based on Tracy, 2013, p. 211

By taking on an even more meta-level, the different perspectives from both sides of the for this case selected ratios exposed the interplay happening ‘**in-between**’ the ratios. Based on how we synthesized the theories about the aspects of play in organizational context, in the case of Scrabble LLC we could also notice other parallels to the ‘Colors of Play’.

We would therefore analyze Scrabble LLC to be located in-between the Pentad’s elements. The organization is always in motion and exchange in-between all of Scrabble’s multiple elements and the regulatory and the experience (Monthoux, 2000); An ‘Organization at Play’ (inspired by Andersen, 2009) in this context is comparable with Follett’s (1942 in Sandelands, 2010) ideas of ‘functional relation’, in which all ratios are in constant conversation and thereby enabling the interplay. This allows for a ‘**self-organized**’ space to function. An organization, in which agents have power and feel encouraged to affect the scene, too. This, in turn, results in motivation on site of the agents, who can affect the scene again.

To conclude, we can identify play in Scrabble LLC’ work philosophy and their purpose, their strong focus on communication, collaboration and transparency. Moreover, we find play in the way the organization is balancing autonomy and helpful guidelines, enabled through

their organizational structure with very flat hierarchies (circle model). The play that happens in and around Scrabble LLC and its community is thus what opens up opportunities for change, by being responsive through constant '**movement**', deliberate openness towards change in meaning (Norman & Verganti, 2014), and engagement of the members who feel '**safe**' and '**free**' to be creative and imaginative. Once Scrabble LLC stops communicating in the in-between, thus stops moving, the organizational functioning does not work anymore for none of its players (stakeholders of the organization), and the play is brought to an end.

#### 4.2.3 CASE STORY Catan LLC (Type B: 'Organization at Play' expected)

(see Transcript 3)

**The Catan LLC Story:** How co-dependency and the right balance of diversity and curation enable and, in turn, are created by an 'Organization at Play'.

##### **The Background**

The office campus Catan LLC describes itself as more than just a co-working space; it is a 'community'. In this way, they connect a broad mass of innovators to build a strong and supportive ecosystem across the walls of their two Berlin campuses, which includes entrepreneurs, freelancers, idea holders, artists, and corporates. The task of the seven community managers is to maintain and cultivate the organically grown ecosystem consisting of 3,500 members across their digital platform, community spaces, startup labs, programs, and events.

We conducted the interview with the head of the community team Robin. The following analysis will thus be based on information gathered mainly from the interview, and from our general impressions that we got by observing the space being members ourselves for one week.

In the case of Catan LLC, we identified the following elements with help of Burke's Pentad model:

**Scene:** Organizational functioning; Leverage one another to bring new ideas to life and new opportunities to life

**Agent:** Members

**Act:** Balance of curation and diversity of community

**Agency:**

- community management team

- events

- platform

- communication

- curation criteria

- diversification

**Purpose:** Innovation – elevate work

We would like to remind that our aim is not to allocate our data to certain elements of the pentad. In the following, we would rather present different selected 'dramatic ratios', that show interesting connections between the elements. The elements assigned in this selection therefore serve as a means to exhibit the case's story and make our argument where we see play happening. We will also see that the elements are exposed to constant changes precisely because of the ratios.

In this case, we talked to the head of the community team of Catan LLC, presupposing to identify aspects of an 'Organization at Play'. Aligned with the 'Colors of Play', we thus also will take a more meta view on the agents and play that is happening in the organization. This will help us interpret the mechanisms that hold this playful structure together. As we are interested in how agents can change the scene and vice versa, we identify the agents to be all the members of Catan LLC.

We thus are particularly interested in the scene and the elements interacting and affecting the scene (the scene being what we believe to be an 'Organization at Play' in this case; A space that is set up for play (Type B)). Therefore, we will start analyzing the case by taking a closer look at what concrete actions and agency are influencing the scene and vice versa (scene-act ratio/ scene-agency ratio) before we look at the connection of the agent-scene ratio. Finally, we will interpret our findings regarding our previously described 'Colors of Play', in order to find parallels from our synthesized understanding of play.

## **The Ratios**

### Act (Agency) to Scene

*"[It is] about creating a sense of belonging, but it's also about figuring out how members can leverage one another to bring new ideas to life and new opportunities to life."*

[00:13:19][00:13:31]

Catan LLC aims to create an organization [scene], in which all members support and work with each other [act] to ultimately elevate their work and co-create innovation [purpose]. For Robin, this is the definition of community and, therefore, also includes the main tasks of the community team that Robin leads. Robin calls their work and main task everyday 'curation', which not only involves creating a sense of belonging (family-like) but also concrete support for all members.

Robin said that the community team is divided into three areas of responsibility. The first team is the 'community support' team, who serves as the first point of contact for all

members when they need support of any kind, such as setting up an IT infrastructure for a new product. Also, they are the communicative face to all members and take care of the Catan LLC 'handbook', which represents their 'knowledge center'. The second team is 'community events', which is designed to connect people and give them the opportunity to share their experiences and stories. The team takes care of the whole set of Catan LLC's event format portfolio, as well as encourage and mentor members to bring their own events to life. The 'community management and programing' team is the third sector, whose main responsibility is to integrate and engage all members in the long term. Their main tasks thus include listening and educating members, especially throughout the integration phase, in order to ensure that all members are aware of their options and find their objectives and needs.

*"[...] based on the theory that the more well integrated [...] the longer they will stay a part of the community."*

[00:07:06][00:07:14]

Beyond the integration phase, they work on creating and maintaining existing engagement programs, which are focused on engaging a particular group of members in the community (such as female mentorship, artist in residence). Thus, it is about managing and enabling members to design various groups in one of which every member should feel addressed and find oneself in, to create ongoing engagement and sense of belonging as part of the Catan LLC community. Trying to understand the feelings of each other by getting to the ground of what the opposite side needs, aligns with the aspect of 'empathy' that we identified to be a 'color' of play.

Robin's main responsibility is to have an eye on the different parts of the community in order to establish the 'curation criteria'. According to hir, setting up these criteria is the most crucial, but also challenging part for the community team. According to Robin, it starts with the selection of members, who must have the right mindset, to begin with, as these members, so Robin, not only represent their clients but also their product and offering to other members in the community:

*"Our community is our USP. It's our most valuable asset. Those people know that when they come to [us], there's a network of people that have sort of been through some type of screening process."*

[00:27:32][00:27:44]

The complexity of managing the individual tasks, as well as the cross-functional management of the three different sectors in order to set up the curation criteria, especially becomes evident when considering their diversity of members. Starting as a mainly tech-focused hub, they soon realized that they need to diversify a lot more. According to Robin, their intention behind this is to grasp all potential by making use of the innovative power that exists at the intersection of different disciplines. They thus not only started diversifying into many different verticals of tech by positioning themselves in different industries but moreover also opened up for a broader variety of professions and people to enter their community. In this way, they increasingly have been including more creative profiles and freelancers in their community (i.e., copywriting, design, illustration).

*“[It is] fact that sometimes the best members we've had have been the most random.”*

[00:37:02][00:37:08]

With this openness and diversity in mind, they started looking out for certain behavioral traits in members, which they could identify through their experience in working with engaged individuals over the past few years. Robin mentioned behaviors like a collaborative mindset and open-mindedness, as examples. Instead of mainly looking at the applicant's achievements so far, they thus wanted to get a better picture of the 'whole person', in order to involve “out of the box” characters. The community team also realized that this process of screening profiles does not work automatically (algorithms did not work), so they decided to speak to each person and make decisions more intuitively. Due to the large number of new members applying, this, so Robin, presented them with another challenge.

Deciding intuitively and based on past experiences is again something where we can see an 'Organization at Play'. Instead of planning and organizing fixed objectives in advance, Catan LLC rather learned to 'play' with alternatives as every new applicant represented a new, unprecedented situation. By deciding intuitively, they thus learned to interpret on the outcome of play instead of trying to plan for it in advance. It is precisely in this aspect of play in which lies its color of 'freedom'.

### Scene to Act

The diversity, as well as the fast-changing market and accelerating pace of new technologies, led them to the understanding that their criteria need to be designed in a very dynamic and responsive way. This means, according to Robin, that ongoing alignment about the curation criteria across all teams and their endeavors must be prevailed. Moreover, they constantly try to “challenge” themselves [00:31:31][00:31:33] with regular workshops within the community

team, being able to adjust the criteria when necessary. Another act to organically grow a diverse set of members, throughout individual members' own network, was to introduce ambassador codes:

*"It's like a signal to our team if someone applies with an ambassador that they probably do understand, have a good understanding of expectations as a community and that we sort of trust as well that members, when they hand out our ambassador code, will say educate the potential incoming member about what it is to be part of this community."* [00:34:56][00:35:20]

In this case, we can see that a scene that requires one to act dynamically and responsively is what challenges one from day to day to proceed and navigate in an unprecedented environment. It is in this 'movement', wherein we would argue to identify the nature of play.

#### Agent to Scene

Next to the already mentioned events and programs that members can design themselves (with help of the community team), these ambassador codes thereby also are an example of how members are shaping the community.

*"[We are] putting the power as well in the hands of our members to expand the network and also for them to bring in the types of people that they want in the community. So, I see that very much in the cooperation and collaboration between members."*

[00:35:49][00:36:06]

Members thus have the opportunity to design the space according to their needs and contribute to the quality of the ecosystem they want to be part and make use of.

Referring back to the behavioral traits that the community team identified to look out for, there is to point out another mentality-shift that Robin mentioned. While starting out searching for members who contain the 'give-first' mentality that they believed is so valuable to uphold a community, they started to realize that 'self-interest' within a functioning community that they aim to create and maintain is "not necessarily a bad thing". This, we believe, goes in hand with their level of diversification of profiles. The higher the degree of different orientations and skills, the more opportunities open up in the community, and the less overlap there is. Corporates, who mainly come to Catan LLC to innovate, create jobs simultaneously benefit from the creative minds and freelancers who bring fresh perspectives with them. Robin tells another



example of one of their 'out-of-the-box' characters, who introduced the topic of sex technology, which is an incredibly fast-growing and high-tech segment, especially in the area of robotics and virtual reality. With this expertise, these members not only have been influencing the industry-direction of other members and Catan LLC but could also provide valuable tech know-how.

*"And so, it has actually broadened expertise to our community that can definitely influence other sectors."* [00:39:26][00:39:35]

*"I think are another great example of that, that we want them to shape the community with us and that we want them to bring in people or industries professions that I think are quite interesting to the whole ecosystem."* [00:40:56] [00:41:19]

In an organization in which it is possible that agents are enabled and even required to change the scene as well and consequently other members (see Scene to Agent in the following), is where we see the 'Organization at Play'.

### Scene to Agent

This is, in turn, also shows how the scene is influencing members as well. The case of the sex tech project clearly illustrated that being open towards diversity and intentional about the selection of new members can have an impact on other members' perspectives as well.

Robin sees the way people work as something that has changed a lot. Especially individuals from the tech sector, entrepreneurs and companies, that Catan LLC wants to address with their concept are today working more and more remotely and living a more nomadic lifestyle; Are 'digital nomads', like Robin refers to them.

*"One of the biggest ironies of the digital age is that somehow we're more connected and less connected at the same time. "*

[00:14:15][00:14:24]

According to Robin, this has a significant impact on the mental health of today's workforce as well, as these circumstances imply a high degree of anonymity, and the amount of information can be just as overwhelming. This is where Robin sees the future need and potential of community management like Catan LLC is pursuing it today. According to Robin, what has been the community with colleagues in the past, nowadays is a supportive and engaging

ecosystem of ever new people and providing the support needed for mental-, social- and professional well-being.

### **Case 3 Conclusion**

Reflecting on what we have heard from Robin about the functioning as organization that considers itself as 'community', we can say that in maintaining a community, there are certain factors that hold it together.

#### Codependency & No Hierarchy

*"Part of running a community is listening [...] and never thinking that we know more than them."* [00:40:19][00:40:29]

*"To run a community, you can't be top down. And I think, to be honest, every top down decision we've made has backfired."* [00:42:49][00:42:56]

Based on Robin's stories, we can analyze again that there are reciprocal dynamics between all elements of our examined Pentad. The scene (community) that the Robin and his team aim to create, is thus, in fact, a product of both, the community team and its members:

*"I think as a team, we're really, really open to their ideas and letting them shape the community and as well our ambassador codes as well."* [00:40:54][00:41:03]

The input and support needed from both parties, therefore, stands for the codependent relationship they have. This codependency is further illustrated in the organizational structure at Catan LLC. We see that the agents are (in comparison to Scrabble LLC) not only empowered and encouraged but indispensable for the scene/ the ecosystem to function. This is also the reason why top-down decisions are not possible so that everyone involved in Catan LLC considers her-/himself on the same level.

#### Find Balance through Dance (Play)

The crux thus lies in balancing the degree of openness, while reacting dynamically to the environment by adjusting the curation criteria, in order to offer the "tangible support" and the ecosystem that members sign up for.

*"It's almost like a dance, like, they send signals and then we send them some. And again, it's just sort of an ongoing conversation with members. So, I think we're probably equally reliant upon each other."* [00:41:21][00:41:36]

What Robin beautifully describes here as "dance", is what we would identify as play, happening in the **'in-between'** of the elements in the Pentad. For us, Catan LLC is an organization that plays itself into existence through the interplay of all its elements (a **'community'** played into existence); A state which we would identify as 'Organization at Play', where the curating act happens through/ and is 'at play'. The balancing act thus happens from all sides (elements), as also the members actively shape the organization, and can be interpreted as play. Thus, an 'Organization at Play' is, also in this context, a space in which all ratios are in constant conversation with each other.

#### React Dynamically through Constant Movement

Reacting dynamically to each other through ongoing dialog is where we see the inherent **'movement'** and change of play (Kavanagh et al., 2011), and it is in this wherein lies **'self-organization'** (Ibid.). The community team setting up the curation criteria, therefore, could be seen as rules of the game (Andersen, 2009) or measures that are set in the beginning and enable the play. These rules further always change towards uncontrollable directions, as the community team has to be receptive to all acts happening within (ideas and needs from members) and outside (technology and market developments) of Catan LLC. Movement in this play is thus about reacting and changing to uncontrollable actions of the other elements of the Pentad.

#### Psychological Safety & Empathy

In the interplay happening, we further could see that these curation criteria (or rules) that also exist to ensure the selection of the right members to the community also affect the individual's level of interest and, therefore, engagement and open-mindedness towards other members. According to Robin, finding acquaintances and creating a sense of belonging in the community starts with being listened to about one's needs right from the integration phase. The feeling of belonging and being listened thus creates a trustful environment for each member; A **'psychological safety'** that is fundamental for creating a safe space for people to engage, be **'creative'** and thrive in (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2011) and also for Robin gets increasingly essential for today's workforces' mental well-being as well. It is in the interest in others through active listening and trust, where we see patterns that align with the **'empathy'** aspect of play, which we, inspired by Sanderlands (2010), interpreted as one of the forces that keep

communities together. Through ongoing conversation and, in fact, through play, the aspect empathy can further be transmitted to (or learned by) other members and/ or fostered on both sides.

### Challenged

„Community is all about dialog and ongoing engagement and also be challenged.“

[00:45:03][00:45:09]

Being challenged, is the final aspect of this ‘Organization at Play’ that stood out when talking to Robin.

*“I also think it's the best thing for us. It's if we weren't challenged by members, then we wouldn't have made as much progress or had this sort of surprising level of engagement that we have.”* [00:45:14][00:45:30]

Necessary for the progress of Catan LLC towards the new and unknown, is aligned with the continuous ‘**movement**’ of play and is something that can be observed across all elements and the ratios within. Thus, continuously being challenged is not only what Catan LLC promises to their members (their client’s progress; perspective: members as clients), but also what is maintaining the functioning of the community itself (thus holding the organization together). Challenging the status quo and opening up the organization but also the own identity for re-interpretation and explore all opportunities is what happens through ‘**creativity and imagination**’ in play (Andersen, 2009; De Cock et al., 2013).

#### 4.2.4 CASE STORY EuroSoft SE (Type C: 'Organization at Play' not expected)

(see Transcript 4)

**The EuroSoft SE Story:** How a playful 'sub-organization' challenges the logics of the overall organization.

##### **The Background**

In our inquiry into play, we wondered whether, and to which extend, we would be able to see our 'Colors of Play' in a larger hierarchical organization, an organization assumingly not 'set up for play'. EuroSoft SE is a major European software company with more than 100.000 employees delivering IT solutions to corporations and governments around the world. Since its founding in Europe in the 1970s, EuroSoft SE has been experiencing tremendous growth worldwide. The company has established regional offices across the globe, and its products are currently used in more than 140 countries. This has led to a complex organizational design based on a traditional hierarchical reporting structure; A structure our interviewee Kadence referred to as a "dusty old European dinosaur". The company is currently undergoing a major change pursuing dramatic simplification processes in its quest to become a leading IT cloud company. However, our interview partner Kadence describes how the company has built up a "complex beast" in terms of organizational structure over the past 45 years, which still determines the strong hierarchy ruling internationally.

For our case analysis of EuroSoft SE, we interviewed Kadence, who is head of a large sales entity and responsible for a major global sales product area. Kadence has been with EuroSoft SE for 12 years, and his areas of responsibility span several countries. In the interview with Kadence, we are interested in the mechanisms on which the company relies to function and whether we can identify 'colors' or shades of play.

**Act:** Selling IT solutions

**Scene:** EuroSoft SE

**Agents:** Many departments and local offices

**Agency:** Processes, policies, hierarchical reporting structures, guidelines, protocols, bonus incentives.

**Purpose:** Keeping the company prosperous

## **The Ratios**

### Scene to Agency

As a major corporation operating on a global scale EuroSoft SE [scene] has many different teams [agents] who are responsible for either a specific product or a particular feature of a product. These different teams perform specific tasks [acts]. To ensure each team follows the vision of the overall organization, Kadence explains how EuroSoft SE has implemented different control mechanisms [agency] to communicate how the teams are allowed to perform their tasks.

EuroSoft SE has clearly defined processes, guidelines, and protocols which grant actions and state how teams are supposed to act in certain situations. Although the strength of hierarchal power varies within the organization depending on geographical locations, Kadence explains that the culture coming from EuroSoft SE's headquarter is dominated by rank and silo thinking, creating an organizational structure with strong reporting and approval processes. The line of command is clear, and authorization 'from above' must be given before decisions can be made or actions taken. As Kadence explains: "Whenever you want something done, you basically need to convince the level above you, which can hinder you" [00:21:05-00:21:11].

Within recent years, EuroSoft SE has aimed to become more 'agile' and 'customer centric', however, Kadence explains that the overall functioning of the firm still heavily relies on reporting and approval mechanisms. The need for control has resulted in a situation where individual and team members primarily are driven by individual interest as each product or feature team, are given individual sales targets (KPIs) by the headquarter of EuroSoft SE. These KPIs are given on a yearly basis and are used to 1) incentivize actions by awarding successful fulfillment of personal KPIs with bonuses and 2) deciding how next year's budget are allocated to teams.

Individuals are thereby encouraged to successfully fulfill personal KPIs to gain economic rewards (bonuses), and team managers are encouraged by potentially receive a larger budget in consecutive years by which they can grow their team. The strong focus on fulfilling these measurements significantly shape the organizational culture.

How strongly EuroSoft SE is focusing on measurable KPIs is, furthermore, showcased in how Kadence describes the concept that they refer to as "Soft Skill KPIs" [00:34:05]. This means that EuroSoft's reporting culture not only applies to 'hard facts' such as sales targets but is also applied to 'soft facts', which are more difficult to measure.

### Agency to Agent

While such approval processes and reporting structures, focused on KPIs, can be very effective tools for management to incentivize actions that benefit the organization, it is possible that too strong emphasis on achieving fragmented goals may harm the organization instead. Kadence explains how EuroSoft SE, from his perspective, has created a culture of multiple “little kingdoms” which at times are at “war”, competing against each other over ‘client budget’ (sales). Kadence elaborates:

*“I'm responsible for the sales back platform in technology, but there are many different sales backs [sales back teams] e.g. digital supply chain, digital core etc. and they are operating like their own little kingdoms, with their own KPIs. Everyone wants to optimize their share of wallet on the customer side.” [00:18:25-00:18:45]*

Because every client has very specific needs, EuroSoft SE’s software solutions do not come in prefabricated packages but instead exist in overall categories. EuroSoft SE then tailors its products within a category to fit the particular needs of each customer. Because each individual product or feature team is given individual sales targets (KPIs), internal competition among product and feature teams become fears, as all teams essentially are competing against each other to be part of the final client solution.

While it is often said that internal competition leads to a better product, Kadence’s experiences from 12 years at EuroSoft SE tell a rather different story. In contrary, Kadence explains how EuroSoft SE’s competitiveness often confuses and harms the relationship with the clients. Kadence states:

*“... What we see is because of this fragmented approach of having different people covering different sales backs [a sales units focusing on a specific 'sales back' feature], but there's only one customer, you see different people with different stories going to a customer, right. And sometimes they are even in competition of getting the customer's budget. So, we even have seen one organization [EuroSoft SE sales unit] telling the customer, oh, you don't need the solution from that organization [another EuroSoft SE sales unit] and vice versa. And that creates a lot of misunderstanding on the customer side. A lot of confusion. It kills trust...” [00:18:45-00:19:25]*

Kadence’s statement indicates that EuroSoft SE potentially has created a reporting culture that is so strongly focused on achieving individual or team KPIs, that different teams may, at times,

work against each other to secure individual gains. With this approach, EuroSoft SE has not set up a culture that incentivizes collaboration among different teams within the organization but rather promotes a competitive landscape where everyone is fighting for themselves, building her or his own “little kingdom”.

### **How Kadence and hir team challenge EuroSoft SE’s reporting culture**

The protocols and processes EuroSoft SE has in place define responsibility among the different teams. However, Kadence argues that “following protocol is something that I would say hinders EuroSoft SE to be successful” [00:22:50-00:22:56]. According to Kadence, the protocols in place give the individuals teams a strong feeling of which tasks [acts] they ‘should’ be doing. However, with the complexity of the products, ‘boarders’ between areas of responsibility can be blurry and busy schedules often lead to situations where the ‘correct employee according to protocol’ to perform the task is unavailable. This makes EuroSoft SE slow in responding to client’s requests. Instead of helping each other out in resolving a client’s issue across teams, Kadence explains that the “little kingdoms” occasionally start a “second war” in which they fight each other with protocols over ‘territory’ for who ‘should’ be solving the client’s issue.

*“They [the clients] want to get professional help and they want to get it quickly and don't want to get stuck in [internal EuroSoft SE] political processes. But that happens that sometimes people [other managers] say hey Kadence, why are you helping them [this client]. They [this client] should go first on my table, right. My guy [an employees of the other manager] needs to fix that. And that behavior is, I don't know, it's toxic to the environment because if that behavior happens in front of the customer and that happens right, then you're exposing yourself in a way you shouldn't expose yourself.”*

*[00:25:14-00:25:41]*

When we asked about the two things Kadence would change if Kadence was made CEO of EuroSoft SE, it was answered: 1) break down the silos and 2) create an approach of bringing the best minds together to find a solution and stop blocking them in approval and reporting processes. This is also how Kadence in hir leadership position aims to organize hir team differently than the typical EuroSoft SE reporting structure:

*“I rather see my team as a network of people. Right. And I'm not in the middle. I'm not on top and I'm not below. I'm just one connection point in the network. And I have all these experts that have this great knowledge, right. And most of my guys are much*



*cleverer than me on this individual solution. So, I value their input on what needs to be done. That's why they are the experts.... if a decision has been taken, we find consensus. Everyone will be heard. Then we decide, and when we decide and move forward, I carry the responsibility. But I wanted [the decision] to be a group discussion. I want everyone to be heard. And I don't want to see things being pushed top down."*

*[00:21:32-00:22:21]*

What is more important to Kadence than following EuroSoft SE's hierarchical protocols, which are bound to areas of territory and responsibilities, is to put more focus on the customers' needs and expectations. According to Kadence, customer-centricity means to solve a client's need as good and fast as possible across internal territories ("boarders") even though that might result in some conflicts ("wars") with other teams ("kingdoms"). Kadence explains:

*"[I believe] we always need to find the right guy for the job to be done. And that doesn't matter if that's a local person in the pre-sales team, a regional person, or you have that function of that function and that person can make the customer happy. Let's put that person in front of the customer. And that's a little bit that the notion I want to live by. But I'm not a typical [EuroSoft SE] manager in that sense."* [00:41:30-00:41:52]

Furthermore, Kadence believes in the importance of building a relationship within his team, which "go beyond just to work" [00:36:55-00:36:57]. For this, Kadence provides us with two examples of how Kadence tries to do so. Firstly, Kadence has set up a WhatsApp group, in which every current member of his team is included, as well as every prior member. The chat is used both for business purposes and more casual conversations as well. Kadence explains how, for instance, the members often share pictures of their family, vacations, and after-work activities. This way, Kadence aims to create a friendly and family-like atmosphere within the team and create a relationship within EuroSoft SE, which goes beyond team borders (by staying in contact with prior colleagues who left his team as well). The second example relates to a team retreat event, where Kadence, instead of booking each team member a hotel room, rented two houses next to each other on Airbnb. Kadence explains how this created a sense of 'community' within the team in which people took care of each other, cooked each other food, and opened up to one another by sharing life stories.

Kadence explains that efforts such as connecting individuals from different teams in an informal way, and the event in which team members lived closely together, has resulted in a situation in which:

*"[...] everyone is stepping up for each other. Everyone is covering each other. There is such a close relationship between all these guys and that breaks down this thinking in silos, that breaks down this hierarchical approach and [need for] approvals." [00:38:47-00:39:04]*

Instead of building his team based on hierarchies with strong reporting and approval processes, Kadence believes in **'self-organization'** and therefore aims to set up the team like a network. Trust, **'psychological safety'**, and **'empathy'**, rather than control, are at the core of Kadence's aim to create a network of individuals with a strong **'communal'** feeling in which people do not fight over tasks but work together across 'territories' to solve the client's need in the best possible way.

#### **Case 4 Conclusion**

From Kadence's story about the functioning of EuroSoft SE, it is difficult to identify/ paint a picture of an 'Organization at Play' - a form of play where the organization is fluid and elements allowed to interplay and adapt to each other representing a stage of constant movement.

However, this does not mean that there is nothing playful to detect at EuroSoft SE. We see a very different kind of 'organizational play' taking place between the agents of the organization. A form of play Andersen (2009), in his historical three-phased categorization of the relationship between play and organization, describes as 'competitive games'. A form of play which amplifies the rules of the organization (Ibid.). EuroSoft SE's hierarchical approval and reporting processes, which strongly focuses on the achievement of fragmented KPIs have set the organization up to become in itself a form of play constituted by multiple 'competitive games'. These 'competitive games' "have visible and explicit rules and [in which] it is evident who is the winner and what it takes to win" (Andersen, 2009, p. 69). The nature of 'competitive games', however, entails a paradox. Even though 'competitive games' constitute competition, 'competitive games' are not 'competition' in themselves, as competitive games have visible and explicit rules, whereas competition is not bound by any specific rules (Andersen, 2009).

We believe, it is perhaps here that EuroSoft SE has developed a sales culture, which mistakes competition from 'competitive games'. While competition to a vast extent often benefits firms, as players continuously find new ways to compete (going beyond rules and thus elevate performance), strict hierarchical approval and reporting processes may instead result in a landscape of 'competitive games'. This eventually causes players to use these 'rules of the game' against each other to progress in the game, rather than competing with each other (playing each other good) in the process of creating something better or 'new'.

Thus, from Kadence's story, we can identify a situation in which EuroSoft SE has created a culture where there are no (or at least no economic) incentives to work together as a totality. Instead of playing with each other for the benefit of the firm (competition), players are primarily playing against each other (competitive games) seeking individual gains (e.g., securing client budget to achieve individual KPIs). A form of solo-play rather than inter-play where the "little kingdoms" within EuroSoft SE are fighting for their own team's gain instead of collaborating on building the best solution possible for the client.

Furthermore, we can see Kadence's more playful approach and the way Kadence aims to set up his team, as challenging the traditional logics of EuroSoft SE. Instead of following the traditional hierarchical structure, Kadence aims to set up a team as a network in which collaboration ('community') is encouraged and where team members majorly 'self-organize' and are part of the decision-making process. Instead of control, Kadence believes in creating 'psychological safety' through trust and 'empathy', as the functions which keep his team together.

Within Kadence's team, we can therefore identify shades of our 'Colors of Play', but no 'Organization at Play' as this cannot exist within hierarchical protocols (logic of control). Nevertheless, Kadence believes in the importance of building a relationship with his team that goes beyond work, which creates a sense of 'community'. Kadence's team's network-structure represents a stage of 'movement' which increases collaboration and keeps the group open to changes. According to Kadence, the WhatsApp group for current as well as prior team members breeds 'seriousness' and brings in elements of 'fun', which not only improves the relationships within Kadence's team but also improve the relationship to the teams where Kadence's former employees now work.

## 5. Key Takeaways & Discussion

In this study, we were able to indicate most of our proposed 'Colors of Play' in the organizations that we analyzed. In the following, we want to discuss our key takeaways about how analyzing these cases from the perspective of play (the 'colors' that we identified) challenges how we understand organization and proposes possible alternate mechanisms (apart from control) that hold organizations together. Afterwards, we will address the limitations of this thesis.

### 5.1 Balance Openness Through Dependencies

In the case of SerialFund LLC, we can see that the openness towards 'the new' that emerges through playing Le Grand Jeu affects the whole functioning and structure of the organization. The way SerialFund LLC plays can perhaps be seen as a form of friendly competition that elevates not only the overall performance but also internal culture and communal bound; Whereas, in the case of EuroSoft SE, we can observe competitive games, being the "little kingdoms" which result from and reinforce the reporting culture of their sales departments.

Moreover, the openness and curiosity that we could not only analyze in the way SerialFund LLC operates aligns with many different shades of the 'Colors of Play'. Openness towards change entails that players step beside themselves to become inspired (Plato, Ion 534b3-5). Leaving all rationalities and 'seriousness' behind and fully 'losing oneself in play', is where new meaning is created, and change is enacted. An 'Organization at Play', in our perspective, acknowledges this potential and creates a 'safe environment' and space for the individual to get lost. Moreover, it places itself in the 'in-between' of the elements of the Pentad (whatever the elements may be), communicating within, inviting for tension and start 'imagining' the 'virtual', which often challenges the 'actual' (Hjorth, 2013).

In both the cases of Scrabble LLC and Catan LLC, we see organizations that aim to support individuals and companies to "be brave" and "let go" ('self-awareness') in order to 'imagine the new' and that challenging the exiting of the organization opens up for constant re-interpretation. An organization, which is 'at play', therefore balances unity and tension (Sandelands, 2010), thereby creating a space to depart from 'meaning' so that new opportunities can emerge.

What we found in Catan LLC's strong community, are strong '**co-dependencies**' for their organizational functioning to work. In this case, all agents were not only empowered and encouraged, but indispensable for the whole ecosystem (community) to function. However, this holds not only true for communities that are 'at play'. Also, the case of SerialFund LLC

illustrates that all parties playing Le Grand Jeu must find a shared objective and that it is crucial to map out the dependencies in advance in order to achieve that collective goal. Everyone is thereby incentivized not to harm any other party involved, as this simultaneously would be self-harm. This stands in contrast with EuroSoft SE's current culture in its sales departments, which, in our perspective, has developed into an organization where the largest empire ("kingdom") wins. There is thus a winner and a loser and no strong co-dependencies among the sales departments.

Through dependencies, the openness of an organization 'at play' is thus naturally balanced and directed into new paths. Put differently, the 'Organization at Play' naturally slides into a state of 'self-organization' through its dependencies (the ratios in the Pentad), a state which Follett (1942 in Sandelands, 2010) refers to as 'functional relating'. We could thus understand these dependencies as rules of the game that do not interrupt the game but enable it. Just like children set a frame (or certain rules) in order to start the game: 'You are the mother; you are the dog; and you are the bad guy'. These 'rules', however, are constantly subject to change once the play starts.

Moreover, we saw an example of how the rules of the game can support Scrabble LLC's self-organized state through certain guidelines. According to Dominique, the guidelines ("handbook") serve as the factor to create these very dependencies needed to continue playing with their certain amount of autonomy in any of their "circles". Dominique, however, refuses to call their organization 'self-ruling', rather as a guideline, which enables self-organization (play), and is set up collectively to avoid in-effectiveness (assuring that every mistake is only made once).

By using the case of Scrabble LLC in order to argue that an 'Organization at Play' is a space where play and working effectively can merge, we briefly want to discuss another topic that we have been concerned with throughout this thesis. We thereby aim to build a bridge to what has been discussed about businesses' aim to be efficient, by explaining where we see the two terms 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' merging in an organization which is 'at play' (aligned with the blurring boundaries of play and work (Burke, 1971)).

## **5.2 Brief Discussion: Effectiveness – Efficiency**

We thus stretch the scene at Scrabble LLC a bit further by looking at the firm within the larger picture of the capitalistic system it is navigating in. While we elaborated earlier, in a current system that, until today, mainly values growth and efficiency, also a company like Scrabble

LLC as service provider has to work efficiently in the end and meet the expectations of their clients and partners in order to stay alive. Today, we can observe a trend in which, due to the abundance of offers and therefore rising competition, the quality and effectiveness of products or services regain value compared to mere quantity and low price. We see this, together with the user-value oriented development, as a crucial turning point for play. We argue, that with the increasing complexity of what is valued by the consumer and thus the market play is a way to find out what is 'effective' today. We find reason for this assumption as we believe that there is a deep-rooted effectiveness in play: If playing is not effective (does not move forward, one does not stay in 'flow'), the play naturally stops. Thus, we would see an organization that is 'at play' as space where effectiveness and what it means to work efficiently merge. Just like the handbook in Scrabble LLC's case, effectiveness is found through playing, but this 'guideline' is subject to constant change; Just as play is a space where rules of the game constantly alter (Andersen, 2009).

### **5.3 Working Seriously Un-Serious through Play's Social Colors**

Further, we want to continue the discussion above, as well as our claim in the 'Colors of Play' 'seriousness', that the process, or most effective way to come up with something beneficial, to firms not only has to be 'serious'. In our analysis of SerialFund LLC and Scrabble LLC, we show that 'Organizations at Play' are spaces in which it is possible to work seriously un-serious while creating value to the firms. However, the dependencies, which need to exist in these cases to balance the openness, rely on strong social components enabled through play's inherent aspects of 'empathy' and 'community'. Thus, for play to evoke all of its creativity in its players to benefit the firm as a whole eventually, this space needs to be perceived as a 'safe' environment: "If I am serious or worried, I can't be creative" (Dominique, [00:46:06] [00:46:08][1.7]). In these cases, we describe as 'Organizations at Play', we therefore find clear evidence that players dare to "ask stupid questions", unlocked by having room to for self-reflection and self-expression, which consequently can open up new opportunities for the entire organization.

## 5.4 Play Challenges Control

The analysis of EuroSoft LLC exemplifies how a playful structure challenges traditional hierarchical reporting structures. Kadence and his playful philosophy for how to work in a team is not afraid of 'playing around' and at times bending 'the rules' at EuroSoft LLC. From Kadence's story we saw how such actions challenge the other "little kingdoms" within EuroSoft LLC, which respond in 'retaliation' expressed by fighting each other armed with protocols. Our analysis of EuroSoft LLC thereby supports the claim that play challenges governmental rationalities and their desire for control.

Kadence's story furthermore exemplifies the difference between Andersen's (2009) notion of 'competition' and 'competitive games'. Rather than playing with each other for the benefit of the firm (competition), the "little kingdoms" primarily use the 'rules of the game' (protocols) to play against each other (competitive games) in which each "kingdom" seeks individual gains. In the case of EuroSoft LLC, we can thus identify a form of solo-play rather than inter-play, which does not benefit the firm as a whole.

## 5.5 Find Balance through "Dance"

Another mechanism that we were able to identify in our cases for an organization to be 'at play' and functions 'self-organized', is the dynamic reaction and communication within the elements. Finding balance thereby is what happens in the relationship of the Pentad's elements, which the community manager of Catan LLC, Robin, describes beautifully as dance:

*"It's almost like a dance, like, they send signals and then we send them some. And again, it's just sort of an ongoing conversation with members."* [00:41:21][00:41:30]

This means that Catan LLC finds balance in and through the dynamic exchange and reaction of signals, enabled through the attunement and synchrony with each other ('empathy'), which consequently can be fostered (learned) through play. To create a new piece of art, we can observe jazz musicians improvising together, just like in the case of SerialFund LLC, and discover that all elements are interdependent to achieve their goal. As this relation is dynamic and responsive, the next outcome of play will play-itself out again, with the permission not to know what the outcome will be.

## 5.6 Finding Analogies in Theater, Community & Organization

In analyzing communities as organized to be ‘at play’, we can identify an interesting connection between community, organization, and the theater. Just like theater, we see the potential for organizations to affect their audiences, thus, to impact people.

By acknowledging the importance of dependencies, we can draw a very interesting parallel to Mucha’s (2009) description of the theater functions. She writes: “Theater is a paradoxically culture of self-interest and collaboration. Those who join are clearly self-directed and seek individual success, even fame. Yet at the same time, they recognize that without an ensemble, an individual does not exist; without an audience, theater does not exist. Only together can one’s self-interest be actualized” (Ibid., p. 15).

Like the performance art world, the communities of Catan LLC and SerialFund LLC must simultaneously balance the interests of the individual and the collective. Similar to the theater, SerialFund LLC brings a unique team of highly skilled individuals together around a common goal (vision) created in such way that it can only be achieved if everyone collaborates. And just like dance only exists while dancing, our analysis shows that SerialFund LLC too, is defined by a temporality. Once the task is solved, the team departs. The organization resets and puts together a completely new team for the next task, keeping the organization in a state of constant movement. Just like we could analyze with Catan LLC, it is an organization continuously playing itself into existence through the interplay of all its elements.

The same challenge of balancing the individual and the collective can be seen in the case of Catan LLC as well. The reason why individuals apply to become members at Catan LLC is obviously driven by self-interest. We also see that this self-interest has to ‘play’ into a larger organization of dependencies that must be balanced out. Much like the theater must keep in mind that all actors in the plays have their own interests as well. The ‘**inter-dependencies**’, however, are the critical mechanism here, as no one could execute the performance (play) alone.



## 6. Limitations & Future Research

In this section, we will reflect on the limitations of this thesis and provide some possibilities for further research.

- ◆ The first limitation we would like to highlight is related to our research philosophy. We believe the world is socially constructed and, therefore, must be uncovered by interpretation. We thereby recognize that we (as researchers), do not see the world objectively given, due to our individual's interpretations of the world are unique and different from each other (Saunders et al., 2012). This is also reflected in the way we are able to study our proposed 'Colors of Play' in real-life cases. Although, we all can recognize play once we experience it or see it, we cannot capture the true essence of play with words. Especially the social components, such as empathy, synchrony, and attunement are aspects that are subject to interpretation, as they are differently felt by everyone, which makes them hard for the researcher and even the researched to comprehend. Moreover, although we refer to our 'model' as 'Colors of Play', we would like to point out that we do not believe that play thereby becomes objectively visual. Just as colors, these aspects are always subject to interpretation. One person's perception of red is more than likely different than to another person, and some people are not able to see colors at all. All this emphasizes the need for interpretation.
- ◆ Also, as our thesis has a strong theoretical focus, one could argue that due to the limited amount of research existing in organizational theory which perceives play in its 'totality' (Huizinga, 1949), it may make our model biased as well as it affects the model's validity to propose it in the first place.
- ◆ A further limitation of our study concerns our empirical sample size. Our case stories are based on a single interview with one individual from each of our four case organizations. Our findings thereby reflect these four individual's perceptions of their organizations, and our conclusions should therefore not be used to generalize any of the organization's situations. Moreover, we hereby also recognize that we could not find indication for all of our 'Colors of Play'. The number of cases we could analyze in the scope of this thesis, the subject of play itself, as well as the information we could get out of each case, however, might have had affected the aspects we could identify as well.
- ◆ Furthermore, our results may be subject to geographic influence. All our case stories are based in Berlin. Within Germany, Berlin is often referred to as an 'island within another country', as it is the digital melting pot of Germany with one of the strongest networks of

skills and founders worldwide. We therefore acknowledge that our findings may be subject to this “Berlin bubble”.

- ◆ Relating back to our philosophy of the world as constructed, we also must acknowledge some potential biases in the way we perceive and interpret the world. As innovation and entrepreneurship students at CBS, we have been ‘colored’ by an institution and trained in a certain way of thinking. Our analysis is thereby subject to this influence. The case studies and the stories that we selected, as well as the specific ratios that we chose as we found them interesting, are based on our personal, professional, and academic influence. If we look at the field of potential organizational structures as ambiguous as play, we recognize that there is a variety of other stories we could have told but did not. This is also exemplified in the theory of Burke’s Pentad: One can shift perspectives within the Pentad to create multiple stories about the same event and make an argument. This creates many complex connections and tensions for future studies that could all be the focus of other papers.
- ◆ Many entrepreneurs start their businesses on their own. We therefore also consider that our research has not considered the possibility for and how solo entrepreneurs may play on their own. Also, if an ‘Organization at Play’ is constituted by interplay, how does the interplay function and look like for solo entrepreneurs? And which role does (inter-) dependencies play in their case?
- ◆ A further limitation regards the size of the organizations in our case stories that we identify as ‘Organization at Play’. SerialFund LLC, Catan LLC and Scrabble LLC are all small to medium-sized organizations, and it would be relevant to investigate if and how these organizations can scale while simultaneously keeping their organization ‘at play’. Moreover, it could be interesting to look into how and whether large organizations can transition to become ‘at play’, and that would affect roles and responsibilities within the organization?
- ◆ How COVID-19 affected our research design

Finally, we would like to give a brief insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic affected our research design. At the beginning of our research, we planned to have a stronger empirical focus with one case company, which is why we reached out and connected with spaces where we assumed we would be able to observe an ‘Organization at Play’. We thus became part of the co-working space (Catan LLC), which we selected as a case company in order to carry out a much more extensive fieldwork research in which we aimed to have multiple in-depth conversations with the community team as well as entrepreneurs. However, the lockdown due to COVID-19 brought this plan to a halt after just one week of working in the space. Therefore, we decided to pivot and put a much greater focus on literature research

and use the contacts already established as case interviews to test our results from the synthesis of secondary data.

Nevertheless, we can objectively say that the current situation has been affecting the process and outcome of the whole thesis. On the one hand, it is the primary data that is affected due to the difficulty of reaching out to organizations and interview partners willing to talk to us in the first place. On the other hand, we were able to observe strong emotions of interview partners and ourselves, which we also believe in having subconsciously influenced the data.

#### Other Future Research

- ◆ In the case of EuroSoft LLC, which we do not identify as ‘Organization at Play’, we saw that a playful structure can exist within a larger hierarchical organization. It would be interesting to look deeper into how this playful structure survives even though constantly being challenged by other “kingdoms” within the larger organization in their quest for control.
- ◆ Furthermore, Jaylen’s philosophy of a “decentralized autonomous organization” opens up an interesting discourse of what and where an organization exists in the digital age. It would be interesting for further research to investigate the potentials and complications of this concept.
- ◆ By talking to the community managers/ builders of Catan LLC and Scrabble LLC, but also seeing the role of Jaylen within SerialFund LLC, it further could be interesting to look deeper into their role in the curation of play. Thus, how does leadership in an ‘Organization at Play’ look like; And what is their role if we describe the underlying logic, balancing the openness and dependencies, as dance (a form of play)?

## 7. Closing Act

This master thesis aimed to investigate how recognizing play in its totality (Huizinga, 1949) challenges the common understanding of organization and the logic of organizations. After studying the concepts of work and play, as well as reviewing play in organizational theory and its changing application in business practice so far, we could observe that even though both concepts are again becoming increasingly intertwined (Kavanagh et al., 2011), we should not limit our inquiry into play to certain controllable aspects of organization.

We learned that play is fluid and a concept that does not fit well into boxes or categories. In fact, due to its ambiguity and authentic character, even language itself might struggle to 'truthfully' be able to 'capture' the meaning of play. Moreover, we could see that play, in fact, holds deep and old connections to organization; Our analysis has shown that organization in play is self-organized, while traditional organization is pre-supposed or planned. This knowledge, together with the theories of Andersen (2009) and Sandelands (2010), helped us to understand play in the context of organization creation on a functional basis: the 'Organization at Play'.

Based on these findings, we proposed the 'Colors of Play' in order to have a conversation about play and analyze the functionality of an organization which is 'at play' in our case studies. This empirical investigation has shown that an 'Organization at Play', just as play, is an in-between phenomenon which moves in the space between the regulatory and the experience, thereby constantly allowing itself and its players to be challenged. We could moreover indicate that this state requires ongoing conversation ('inter-play', Andersen, 2009), as once the organization stops moving, the play is brought to an end, and vice versa.

Thus, an 'Organization at Play' is, where it is possible to work seriously unserious, and where effectiveness and what it means to work efficiently can merge; A safe space, inviting for tension and imagination, which encourages all its players (employees) to play with what the organization is, and can consequently lead to new meaning. The mechanism we discovered which holds this 'Organization at Play' together is 'balancing openness through dependencies'. Our result therefore can be considered as a starting point to further investigate how to find this balance through dance, which we see as form of play. This new logic, together with play's inherent social components like empathy in a 'played out' community, therefore challenges the traditional logics of organizations, by replacing their 'longing' for plan and control.

Our 'play with play' ends here. However, our proposed 'Colors of Play', which we referred to as a 'model', should not be seen as something static, rather fluid and subject to interpretation. Thus, as point of departure for an ongoing conversation which, precisely due to the nature of play, should never come to a halt.

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# Appendices

## Appendix (1): Publications Uncovered in Our Preliminary Narrative Review

Table 5: Publications Uncovered in Our Preliminary Narrative Review, own illustration

Name	Year	Title	Keywords	Our Keywords
Reckhenrich	2008	Understanding Creativity - The Manager as Artist	Process Creativity, Management	
Weiss	2019	Call for Papers: The Human Side of Innovation Management	CALL FOR PAPERS	
Kaufman	2010	The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity (500 Pages)	Creativity Research	
Carole J. Makela Sharon Anderson Kenneth L. Tremblay	2011	Organizational Creativity: The Relationship Between Creativity, Values, And Performance in Architectural Practice	Organizational Creativity	
Hjorth Et Al.	2018	Organizational Creativity, Play and Entrepreneurship: Introduction and Framing	Summarize Existing Research About Organizational Creativity, Play and Entrepreneurship	
Sisk	2014	Optimizing Creativity	Creativity, Creative Problem-Solving, Visionizing	
Anderson Et Al.		Innovation and Creativity in Organizations: A State-Of-The-Science Review, Prospective Commentary, And Guiding Framework	Creativity and Innovation, Themes for Future Research, Main Theoretical Frameworks, Factors Implicated, And Example Publications	
Crilly & Firth	2019	Creativity and Fixation in The Real World: Three Case Studies Of Invention, Design And Innovation	Creative Design, Creativity, Design Fixation, Product Development, Prototypes	

Darzin Et Al.	1999	Multilevel Theorizing About Creativity in Organizations: A Sensemaking Perspective	
Awan, Sroufe & Kraslawski	2019	Creativity Enables Sustainable Development: Supplier Engagement As A Boundary Condition for The Positive Effect On Green Innovation	Creativity, Sustainability, Circular Economy, Innovation
Duffy	N.D.	Adulthood and The Importance Of Play: A Gateway For Design	Play, Creativity, Problem Solving
Calcagno	2017	Interpreting Innovation	Design, Creativity, Art
George		Creativity in Organizations	Creativity,
Oldham, Greg R. ; Cummings, Anne	1996	Employee Creativity- Personal and Contextual Factors at Work	Creativity, Work,
Fotaki Et Al	2020	Spirituality, Symbolism and Storytelling in Twentyfirst- Century Organizations: Understanding And Addressing The Crisis Of Imagination	Anthropology, Ethnography, Imagination, Metaphor, Religion, Spirituality, Storytelling, Symbolism
Garzin Et Al	2019	Spirituality and Entrepreneurship- The Role Of Magical Thinking In Future- Oriented Sensemaking	Entrepreneurship, Magical Realism, Narrative Analysis, Prospective Sensemaking
Simon	2005	Managing Creative Projects- An Empirical Synthesis of Activities	Creativity at Work, Managing Projects; Managing and Leading; Creative Projects; Teams; Innovation
Stephen & Heather	2000	The Aesthetics of Organization	Aesthetic, Aesthetic Organizing, Aesthetics of Organization, Organization, Aesthetic Kreis, Art as Gesamtkunstwerk
Walia	2019	A Dynamic Definition of Creativity	

Monthoux	2000	Performing the Absolute. Marina Abramovic Organizing the Unfinished Business of Arthur Schopenhauer		Aesthetics
Ashton & Giddings	2018	At Work in The Toybox: Bedrooms, Playgrounds and Ideas of Play in Creative Cultural Work		Play, Management
Strauß	2018	BOOK REVIEW - Dialogues Between Art and Business: Collaborations, Cooptations, And Autonomy in A Knowledge Society		In-Between, Dialogue, Messiness/ Structure
Runco & Jaeger	2012	The Standard Definition of Creativity	Creativity	Creativity
Petelczyc Et Al.	2018	Play at Work: An Integrative Review and Agenda for Future Research	Definitions of Play, Play at Work & Limitations - REVIEW Antecedents & Consequences of Play at Work (3 Levels of Analysis) Future Research	Play at Work



## Appendix (2): Search Log

Table 6: Search Log, own illustration

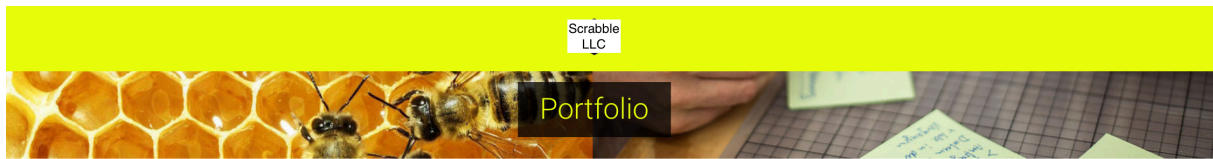
SEARCH	SEARCH RESULTS
<b>Keyword search 1</b>	
«'Play' [title] AND 'organization' [any field]»	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kavanagh et al., (2011)</li> <li>- Kristiansen &amp; Rasmussen (2014)</li> <li>- Hjorth, Strati, Eghenter, Dodd &amp; Weik (2018)</li> <li>- Hjorth (2015)</li> <li>- Munro (2018)</li> <li>- Petelczyc et al., (2018)</li> <li>- Hibbert &amp; Huxham (2010)</li> <li>- Linstead et al., (2018)</li> <li>- Pallesen et al., (2018)</li> <li>- Sørensen &amp; Spoelstra (2011)</li> <li>- Tökkäri (2015)</li> <li>- Statler, Heracleous, Jacobs (2011)</li> <li>- Dougherty, Takacs (2004)</li> <li>- Crowther, Orefice &amp; Beard (2018)</li> </ul>
<b>Area search 1</b>	
'Special Issue: Organizational Creativity, Play and Entrepreneurship with 'Play' as [subject]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Alexandersson, Kalonaityteet et al., (2018)</li> <li>- Johnsen, Olaison, Sørensen et al., (2018)</li> </ul>
<b>Backward search with search phrase 1</b>	
Petelczyc et al., (2018) with search phrase «'Play' [subject] AND 'organization' [any field] OR 'management' [any field]]»	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Andersen &amp; Pors (2014)</li> <li>- Butler (2015)</li> <li>- Bogdan, Crump &amp; Holm (2005)</li> <li>- Dandridge (1986)</li> <li>- Fleming (2005)</li> <li>- Glynn &amp; Webster (1992)</li> <li>- Hunter, Jemielniak &amp; Postuła (2010)</li> <li>- Kolb &amp; Kolb (2010)</li> <li>- Mainemelis &amp; Ronson (2006)</li> <li>- Engler (2001)</li> <li>- Pors &amp; Andersen (2014)</li> <li>- Sandelands (2010)</li> <li>- Schmidt &amp; Rosenberg (2014)</li> <li>- Starbuck &amp; Webster (1991)</li> <li>- Statler, Roos &amp; Victor (2009)</li> <li>- Caillois (1957)</li> <li>- Van Vleet &amp; Feeney (2015)</li> </ul>

	- Abramis (1990)
<b>Expert input</b>	
Suggestion by supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kao (1997)</li> <li>- Huizinga (1949)</li> </ul>
<b>Keyword search 2</b>	
«"Play at work" [any field]»	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Brooks &amp; Bowker (2002)</li> <li>- West, Hoff &amp; Carlson (2013)</li> <li>- West (2015)</li> </ul>
<b>Backward search with search phrase 2</b>	
Backward search with 'Play' [subject] AND 'organization' [any field] OR 'management' [any field]	- Andersen (2009)

### Appendix (3): Systematic Literature Search Journal List

- Organization Studies
- Journal of Management
- Organization
- Organizations and Management
- Journal of Applied Behavioral Science
- Long Range Planning
- The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation
- Management & Organizational History
- Culture and Organization
- The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science
- Psychological Reports
- Journal of Organizational Change
- Management
- Research in Organizational Behavior
- The British Journal of Aesthetics
- Journal of Organizational Change
- Accounting, Management and Information Technologies
- Journal of Change Management
- Perspectives on Psychological Science
- American Behavioral Scientist
- Information, Communication & Society
- The international journal of creativity and problem solving

## Appendix (4): Scrabble LLC



### Next Generation Business. Today.

Scrabble LLC begleitet und befähigt Unternehmen, Organisationen und Menschen, das nächste Kapitel der eigenen Entwicklung aufzuschlagen. Sich den Fragen unserer Zeit zu stellen und den nächsten Schritt zu gehen. Das erfordert Mut. Den Mut, sich auf unbekanntes Terrain zu wagen. Alte Gewohnheiten loszulassen und sich in Frage zu stellen.

Man könnte also auch sagen: Wir helfen Ihnen, mutig zu sein.

Was Sie davon haben? Neue Perspektiven. Zukunftsweisende Geschäftsmodelle. Mehr Lebendigkeit in der Organisation. Und das gute Gefühl, zu den Unternehmen neuen Typs zu gehören. Zu denen, die erfolgreich sind weil sie Sinn stiften und damit die Welt zu einem besseren Ort machen. Natürlich ist das nicht einfach und es geht nicht alles auf einmal. Aber jeder Schritt in die richtige Richtung ist ein richtiger Schritt.

[#DieZukunftderArbeit](#)

In diesen Feldern arbeiten wir:

Own translation (name anonymized):

*“Scrabble LLC accompanies and empowers companies, organizations and people to open the next chapter of their own development. **To face the questions of our time and to take the next step. That takes courage. The courage to venture into uncharted territory. Letting go of old habits and questioning yourself. You could also say: we help you to be brave.***

*What do you get from it? New perspectives. Forward-looking business models. More liveliness in the organization. And the good feeling of belonging to a new type of company. To those who are successful because they make sense and thus make the world a better place. Of course, this is not easy and it does not function all at once. But every step in the right direction is a right step.”*