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Examining an Educative Change Management Simulation

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The figural space of the business simulacrum: examining an educative change management simulation

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present an examination of a game-based business simulation. We approach the simulation as a provocative technique and analyse it as a business simulacrum. Business simulacra are referential artifacts that partake in the coordination of business and economy. In the study, we shed light on how business simulacra affect actors' subjectivity. We suggest that Lyotard's writing provides hitherto underappreciated inspiration for addressing this issue. Lyotard offers a theorization and a vocabulary which centers the simulacrum's performativity in the space between the perceived and the perceiver. The analysis shows how the simulation designers have assembled the game by sourcing established business simulacra and translating them into easy-to-discern figures of business reality. The designers couple this translated business simulacrum with ludic elements and reflexivity techniques, aimed at making the learning subjects realize and articulate change management problems. With the sensitives provided by Lyotard, the paper discusses simulacra's potentials to provoke business reality in events that entangle business subjects' subconscious with figures of business reality sourced from popular business discourse. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the analysis for current debates on artificiality in business education, and business simulacra's performativity more generally.

Introduction

In popular parlance, a simulacrum is a copy without an original. Baudrillard's (1981/1994) popularization of the concept has emphasized how pervasive simulacra are in modern society, and gazing across organizations, it is striking to note the abundance of simulacra used to orchestrate business; performance indicators, person-type indicators, strategic roadmaps, etc. It appears they have become part of the core of modern organizations. Simulacra provide coordinates for business actors to orient by and determine what is essential, or real even, and what is not. Pondering on this Muniesa (2014) argues that a function of a business simulacrum is to provoke business reality, revealing economic reality by explicating it and by providing means for its articulation. A performance measurement, for instance, both indicates an employe's performance based on prefigured criteria, and animates the employe to perform in ways that are aligned with the assessment criteria.

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Thus, the simulacrum has become a vehicle for provoking the performance it was designed to represent. A function of the simulacrum is to effectuate reality.

In this paper, we aim to contribute to the theorization of how business simulacra provoke human subjects to articulate business reality. We argue that a vocabulary for business simulacra's provocative aspects is in need of development. The paper suggests that Lyotard's (1971/2011) concept of *the figure* and the associated notion of *figural space* are relevant here. In this paper, we apply Lyotard's concepts to a particular business simulation, Wallbreakers, and examine their implications. Looking into how the designers have assembled Wallbreakers, we consider the simulation's techniques for activating business subjects' potential for articulating their personal change management reality. Simulation-based management education is a particularly interesting subject matter for the current inquiry. Muniesa's investigations of the Harvard Case Method highlight tensions relating to the dramatization of business reality. He argues that business simulations produce a parallel and exaggerated version of reality. The Harvard Case Method can be seen as a tool to challenge business subjects to articulate behavior congruent to this artificial reality, that is, demonstrating decisiveness and courage in the simulated act (Lezaun and Muniesa 2017, Muniesa 2014, pp. 96–103). Simulations in education face us with a key tension relating to the problem of the simulacrum. How can we teach business reality by making use of a simulacrum? Critiques have already been articulated regarding artificial reality in education (Linderoth 2012, Pias 2017, p. 213, Suchman 2016), somewhat echoing the platonic critique of faux representations (i.e. simulacra) (Deleuze 1969/1990). In this paper, we follow Muniesa's (2014) proposal, to sidestep the platonic critique by taking a pragmatic stance in order to reconsider simulacra's means of effectuation. We propose that Lyotard's triadic model of figures can help us gain a more nuanced understanding of the performativity of business games and business simulacra in general.

Wallbreakers is designed by the Danish change agency Workz, an offspring of a film production company. Over the years, Wallbreakers has attracted a global audience of customers from various industries and academic business institutions. As such, Wallbreakers has become a significant actor in the world of management education and game-based learning. We analyze the game's design and trace the source material and the points of translation. This reveals a design process of mixing management literature, psychotherapeutic techniques, principles of board game design, and creative twists with inspiration from the film industry. We highlight how the simulation's figurines play a threefold role. Firstly, they enable interaction with the game. Secondly, they explicate the simulation's rendering of business reality. Thirdly, they serve as vehicles for the learning subjects to articulate their own experience of their organization's change management reality. Wallbreakers deploys a combination of open-ended dialogue exercises and binary castigation- and gratification reactions. This mixture aims at both channeling and liberating the training subjects' thinking, in a contained workshop space. By drawing on Lyotard's theorization on figures and figurality, we highlight how the assemblage of simulations can be seen as a figuration process that entails folding discourse into figures to alter the discourse's ability to affect learning subjects. Lyotard's theorization helps us see how the simulation's figures can facilitate learning subjects' articulation of both conscious ideas of what is going on their organization, and subconscious contents associated with their anxieties and desires. Thus, the simulation does not only represent a generic version of business reality, it provokes the learning subjects to articulate it.

The paper has four sections. The first introduces the phenomenon of games and simulations for education. The second section clarifies how Lyotard's concept of the figure has relevance for the study of business simulacra, and the third presents the analysis of Wallbreakers. In the final section we critically discuss how the concept of the simulacrum and Lyotard's three types of figures aid our examination and reflect on what Lyotardian thinking adds to the theorization on the performativity of business simulacra more broadly.

Functions of the artificial in management education

Shifting consultancy fads and academic interests shape the ideals of the management discipline (Rost 1991). Management education fosters fantasies which managers' can come to incorporate

when narrating their business selves (Sveningsson and Larsson 2006). Simulation- and game-based approaches (Abt 1987) are one type of technique used for representing management ideals and shaping managers. By simulating essential aspects of business reality, the goal of these techniques is to facilitate experience-based learning in a safe environment. In this, designers aim at facilitating learning by simulating real world tasks. These games can take various shapes, for instance, role-play, simple task simulation, or case based dramatized decision-making (Blumberg *et al.* 2013). Hence, business games orchestrate a sort of learning-oriented pretend play. The idea of gamifying literally everything has come under much hype as of late implying, for instance, the idea that 'active' participatory learning trumps conventional 'passive' consumption (Agger 2016). We have entered a 'ludic century' Zimmerman (2015, p. 21) claims, and it is time for all to appreciate this fact and unleash this 'engine of innovation and creativity.' Rightfully so, ludic elements have come to pervade the economies and by now seem inescapable (Giddings, Seth, Alison & Harvey, 2018).

However, some argue against the idea that people learn from playing games, noting that the simplicity of game worlds cannot compare with real world complexity. This entails that the learning that occurs from playing a game will not be applicable to real world problems (Linder-oth 2012). Some even warn that simulation-based learning can be dangerous, for instance, if learning subjects base future decisions on experiences obtained under artificial conditions (Such-man 2016). A less pessimistic stance on the function of artificiality in education is found in Slo-terdijk's examination of 'anthropotechniques;' tools and techniques for improving the self. Sloterdijk observes how it often is the case that educational techniques exploit the artificial and use it to enable learning subjects to leave normality, step out of 'the river of habits' (Slo-terdijk 2013, p. 222). Simulations may provide a space in which learning subjects can rise above their normal perception of reality and perform exercises with the intention of breaking their ties to current habits, thereby allowing them to reach for higher plateaus of competence and contemplation (Sloterdijk 2013, pp. 156–167). In perspective offered by Sloterdijk, the arrangement of artificial reality is a premise for self-development, not an inherent problem. Investigating the functions of the staging of artificial reality, Muniesa (2014) highlights that the Harvard Business School case method goes further than merely mimicking business prac-tices. Rather, the purpose appears to be to exaggerate what the educator perceives to be relevant business problems and expose the learning subjects to them in a contained environment. A function of dramatization is that it serves to challenge learning subjects to make decisions beyond what they are comfortable with (Lezaun and Muniesa 2017): an infantilized substitute of the horrors of business reality they supposedly will meet.

Observing simulation-based management education, Muniesa (2014) mobilizes the concept of simulacrum. Muniesa informs his conceptualization of the simulacrum by drawing on Deleuze (1969/1990). A Deleuzian position on the simulacrum is agnostic or even positive. This is in contrast to a pessimistic reading of simulacra, as a deceiving fake reality, as proposed by Bau-drillard (1981/1994). Deleuze encourages us to shift focus from the obsession with distinguishing between true representations (the eikone), and faux representations, (simulacra), and instead consider all simulacra as effects with equal relevance for the emergence of sense. Muniesa demonstrates that examination of simulacra can be a relevant approach for inquiring into the performativity of cultural economy (Muniesa *et al.* 2011, 2014, 2010). Of particular relevance for this paper, Munisea observes the role of simulacral management education and the attempts made of realizing the idealized business self (Lezaun and Muniesa 2017, Muniesa 2017). He suggests we think of simulacra as provocations of reality, vehicles that eventually contribute to the effectuation of business performance. Therefore, he argues, we should study business simulacra as a subject matter in their own right (Muniesa 2014). This paper follows Muniesa's call for more in-depth studies into the performativity of business simulacra, by examining how a popular example of these has been assembled.

Simulation-based education

With the claim of facilitating 'experiential learning' (Wolfe 1993), simulation-based learning answers a call in leadership development literature to bridge theory and practice (DeRue and Myers 2013). The literature usually traces the history of game- and simulation-based learning back to eighteenth century Prussian military. The war-game *Das taktische Kriegsspiel* created by George von Reisswitz, was a physical, table-sized war game built around a set of materialized figurines representing contemporary military elements, such as cannons and cavalry. Reisswitz referred to the game as a 'mechanical device to represent tactical manoeuvres to the senses' (Hilgers 2012, p. 38). As the military industry continued to develop game-based training technologies over time, and the business world began employing its own versions of serious games and business simulations in the 1950s (Pias 2017).

The literature on game-based learning often highlights the idea of the 'magic circle' (Salen *et al.* 2004) when conceptualizing the event of game-immersion, in which subjects have interaction beyond the normal, governed by implicitly or explicitly defined rules of play. Huizinga, who originally coined the term, referred to the 'magic circle' as the emergence of 'temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart' (Huizinga 1949, p. 10). Serious games are said to have the ability to 'transport' (Blumberg *et al.* 2013) players to other realities, from where they are able to yield 'cognitive, emotional and imagery involvement' (Green *et al.* 2004, p. 311) in the simulated tasks. Michael and Chen (2005, p. 51) argue that game designers think in two modes when designing immersive realities; they seek either to copy the world as it is or to construct an abstract condensation of it. The argument seems to be that the complexity of the mundane obfuscates the essence of reality, implying that exposure to virtual 'dramatic representations of the real problem' (Abt 1987, p. 1) is an approach to circumvent this. Promoters of simulation-based education thereby claim to offer a technique that brings learning subjects closer to a more real version of the problems they will face in reality. We can think of a simulation as a 'miniature' that seeks to realize its theme in an ideal state by constructing a controlled 'island,' separate from the disturbing influences of reality (Lezaun 2011). Business simulacra, when used in serious games, are techniques that allow for both provoking reality and containing its articulation (Lezaun *et al.* 2013).

Theorizing the performativity of simulacra, reintroducing the concept of figure

In theorizing the interaction between the business subject, the simulacrum and the context of ideas, we suggest that the early work of Lyotard (1971/2011) provides an overlooked resource in the performativity literature. Lyotard (1984) is commonly recognized in performativity studies for introducing the notion of performativity, and coupling it with knowledge production and production efficiency (Gond 2006). Lyotard is recognized for coining and describing the postmodern condition, and the 'materialization of knowledge' which is a key notion when considering the performativity of business simulacra, and their ability to do things despite relying on unsettled reality definitions (Muniesa 2014, p. 8). Under the postmodern condition, subjects perform knowledge, and knowledge represents objects as pragmatic means of utility, rather than representations of final truths. The use of financial objects is an example of this, and shows how one object can come to both express reality and realize it as effect (Muniesa *et al.* 2011). Muniesa (2014, p. 8) highlights Lyotard as a significant driver in the 'performative turn,' the empirical and philosophical interest in reality as constituted in performativity. The current paper follows the trace of Lyotard (1971/2011) and highlights a piece of his work developed before his engagement with concepts of performativity and postmodernity, namely his doctoral thesis 'Figure, Discourse.' In our view, this part of Lyotard's work that has yet to receive the attention it deserves in regards to the examination of business simulacra's performativity.

In 'Figure, Discourse' Lyotard (1971/2011) challenges, and aims to bridge, the theoretical divide between phenomenology, linguistic structuralism, and psychoanalysis. In part, the thesis was an attack on structuralism's attempt at occupying the research on experience and perception. Lyotard dedicated his examination to 'sight' underscoring a sympathy for phenomenology. His goal was not to expel the significance of language though, or rendering it inferior to preverbal perception. Instead, he wanted to make the case that the three elements, perception, language, and the subconscious were all active elements in perception. Collectively they contributed to the emergence of a *figural space,* the event of perception. In clarifying his view, Lyotard developed a conceptualization of three types of figures.

- Figure–image: Referring to the outline of a figure, for example, the drawing of a tree.
- Figure-form: The perceiver's gestalt of the figure, which is somewhat plastic and fluctuating.
- The figure–matrix: Human sub-consciousness, a deep configuration, which requires reflexive analysis to approximate, 'but that can never become object either of vision or signification' (Lyotard 1971/2011, p. 279).

With this triadic relationship, Lyotard examined how expressionist art could function as a medium for the articulation of the subconscious. The subconscious, Lyotard argues, can be inspired by, projected into, and contained in the figure–image. The subconscious interacts with the figure–image, in a way that both summons it, and at the same time, shapes it. In this process, the subject simultaneously grants significance, figure-form, to the figure–image. The indicative potentials of figure–images make them able to both contain the figure–matrix, as it provides the figure–matrix a mode of expression. However, this operation also renders the figure–matrix absent, as the projecting subject will lose sight of the origin of the tension, as soon as it has lent itself to the figure–image (Lyotard 1971/2011, pp. 281–282). Figures–images simultaneously produce presence *and* absence of the represented.

Discourse has the same potential of articulating the subconscious, Lyotard agrees with his linguistic counterparts on this. Language is always active during perception. Lyotard states; 'Only from within language can one get to and enter the figure' (1971/2011, p. 7). Its presence has the potential of devouring the significance of the figure–image, altering its form. Yet, he also stresses, that language does not pre-figure the figure-form. On the contrary, figures can also devour discourse, for instance, when a figure gives a metaphor physical shape on the canvas. A figure–image can both facilitate the travel of discourse, but it will do so in ways that also reduces its nuances (Lyotard 1971/2011, p. 50). Hence, figure and discourse take turn in occupying each other, both obstructing and aiding one another's claim on rendering reality.

Lyotard's theorization on figure and discourse offers concepts that increase our sensitivity towards the nuances of performativity of simulacra, and their operations in the space between the human subject, the material matter, and the network of language. The conceptual apparatus of the figure offers a theoretical vantage point for examining the relations between simulacra and subjectivity. The theorization is relevant for us because it plunges us into the question of entanglement of material, perception, and language. Necessary considerations when examining performativity of business simulacra. The theorization helps articulate how business simulacra operate, especially in arrangements that aim at provoking business subjects to make reality articulations. In the present paper, we find inspiration from Lyotard's theorizations of 'Figure, Discourse' when analysing the design of the change-management simulation, Wallbreakers. We seek to understand how the designers think of their tool and how they intend for it to influence business subjects.

Method and analytical approach

To attain a rich understanding of Wallbreakers, we started by reading the game materials, examining the game elements, and observing it in operation. We conducted interviews with the game

designer and two consultants from the consultancy. We conducted participant observation of the consultancy's facilitator training. Additionally, we attended promotional events to gain insight on how the consultancy presented their games to customers.[1] Access to the consultancy came through our involvement in a larger research project, which aimed at evaluating a game-based approach to organizational interventions. We conducted our analysis with inspiration from the methodological approach of tracing the translations involved in network stabilization (Justesen 2020). Subsequently, we found inspiration in the notion of figuration; analytical unfolding of figures folded in performance, material, and semiotic (Suchman 2012). Mainly though, Lyotard's three types of figures have led the sensitivity of the analysis. We have been particularly attentive to the image–figures provided in the simulation as well as the discourses that attach to them. Lastly, we have been critically reflexive in relation to the question of how the game's techniques can come to influence the coupling between image–figure, figure-form, and figure–matrix.

For the analytic purposes of this paper, we conducted three stages of analysis and coding. The initial stage started during data collection while observing the Wallbreakers workshops. During these observations, we made field notes on the objective occurrences and preliminary thoughts on the less obvious mechanisms. We used our notes to inform the interview with the consultancy. In the second stage of analysis, we used NVivo 12 (QSR 2015) to transcribe the audiotaped interviews, and code them thematically, to gain an impression of the content. In the second stage, we identified figures to focus on in the analysis. In the third stage, we coupled the themes from the interviews with the supplementary notes we had gathered, revisiting and re-reading the original interviews in a closer analysis. This led to the four themes presented in the analysis.

We have structured the analysis as follows. First, we introduce the simulation and the consultancy that made it. Then we identify the performative figures in the simulation. Next, we examine the figuration process that led to the figures. Finally, we examine the simulation's mechanisms and techniques for affecting the learning subjects.

Analysis

Wallbreakers is a physical board game designed to simulate an organizational change process. It is a generic tool sold to companies as change management education. The game offers consultants a self-contained standardized package of a plug-and-play learning experience. Workz, a Danish-based change management consultancy, designed Wallbreakers in 2005 under a different company name and has refined it over the following years. Workz is an offshoot of the experimental Danish film production company Zentropa. Workz designed Wallbreakers as their first commercial success, and they largely owe their success to the achievements of the game. Zentropa is known for its radical approach to management, with a CEO who deliberately uses norm-violating acts to create unease by crossing the personal boundaries of the employes (Sørensen and Villadsen 2017). The CEO intends the management style to create an atmosphere that provokes progressive ideas by liberating the artists from their ideational constraints. While Workz was still part of Zentropa, it took part in orchestrating workshops and events to boost employes' creativity. This was done by giving difficult tasks to personnel under dramatized and extreme conditions, somewhat resembling the approach of the Harvard Case Method (Lange 2012, Lezaun and Muniesa 2017). A significant success for Zentropa were the Dogma films of 1995, which became critically acclaimed and internationally recognized. The films followed the Dogma manifesto, which consists of 10 commandments, or obstacles, which come to limit the director's freedom. For instance, the director had to shoot the film with a handheld camera, could not add sound effects in post edit and was not allowed to use superficial violence (Schepelern 2005). The idea was to enable cheap film production and force new ways of cinema to emerge. It was a playful form of masochistic pursuit of creativity, which one of the Dogma originators, Lar von Trier, would come to explore and enact more fully in his experimental arts documentary 'The Five Obstructions (De fem benspænd).' Workz carries with it a heritage from Zentropa, and credit the film production company for having inspired

their way of working. Besides the influence from Zentropa, the core partners of Workz share a background in the Danish board- and roleplaying-game community. Workz' familiarity with the conventions and developments in game design is mainly attributed to this latter part.

Identifying the figures of Wallbreakers

The material package of Wallbreakers mainly consists of a range of artifacts used to represent essential aspects of the simulation and maneuvre the simulation. The package also contains a detailed facilitator guide, with standardized timetables, models, and prescriptions for good facilitation.

The object of the game is to move a department with ten employes through an organizational change process as quickly as possible, with as many employes aboard the change as possible. The learning subjects cooperate in groups, making decisions about how to manage the change process in a way that both ensures its success and reduces the number of employes that move to resistance. The simulation revolves around a narrative of a company merger. The designers wrote the narrative with inspiration from a real-world case, a merger between two IT companies. The designers originally built Wallbreakers to help managers at the time facilitate the merger.

The designers have figured essential aspects of the simulation with the use of tangible figurines, game boards, and playing cards. The department is figured as a plastic bus. The change is figured on the game board – as a road divided into three phases: startup, implementation, and anchoring. A pavement running around the road functions as the figure of resistance. It is divided into three levels: (1) 'I don't understand it,' (2) 'I don't like it' and (3) 'I don't trust you.' The consultants place the bus on the road in the startup phase, and over the course of the game, the bus moves through the three phases of change. When employes begin resisting the change, the consultants or the learning subjects move the figurines from the bus onto the pavement. Conversely, when employes become more positive towards the change, they are moved towards, and eventually, back on the bus.

The first task the consultants give the learning subjects is to choose a gear, ranging from one to four, for the startup phase. The game accompanies each gear with a description of the choice's implications in the game world. The choice of a high gear implies putting more energy into implementing the change at the cost of less focus on managing the daily operations. The opposite applies for a low gear. The learning subjects choose a gear by opening one of the four flaps on the gear card, which is a cardboard handout. This act resembles that of a child opening an advent calendar. Text beneath the flap reveals the consequences of the choice in the game, primarily the speed of the bus, and which employes move into resistance. It also explains why specific employes will move to

The three change phases are represented by the game board
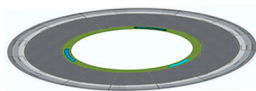
Three levels of resistance are represented by the sidewalk on the game board
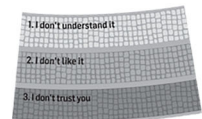
Employees are represented by playing pieces

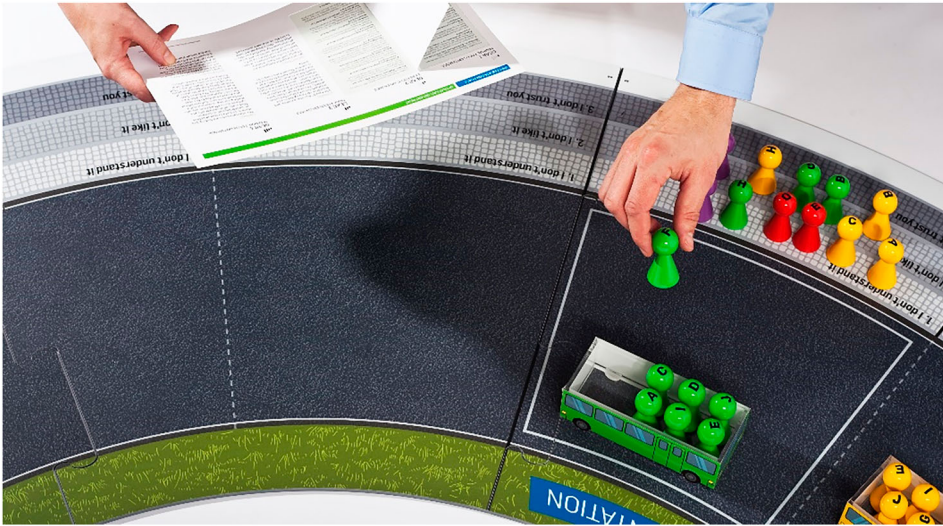Leadership actions are represented by action cards

The intensity of the change phase is represented by the gear choice

The department is represented by a bus

Figure 1. Content of Wallbreakers (Taken from consultancy's PowerPoint presentation).

Figure 2. Stock photo of Wallbreakers showing the busses, the employes, the road, the pavement, a card, and learning subjects' hands.

resistance. Each employe has a short biography, providing both a description of the employe's role and history in the company and personality. The designers intend the employe's responses to reflect their individual personality constitutions, and the consultants will encourage the learning subjects to use these descriptions to speculate on the employe's individual reactions, before making a decision. Designing the game responses the designers drew inspiration from change management literature (Kotter 1996, Maurer 1996) and the personality type descriptions from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers 1962). The change management literature and the personality type indicator are generally popular in business practice. This mix of inspirations provides the consultants a body of references, which they will refer to when accounting for the reasons behind the game's design and reactions (See Figure 1 and 2).

Following the choice of gear the consultants ask the learning subjects to choose four out of twelve 'leadership action cards' they think will help them get employes out of resistance and back onto the bus. These choices resonate with the prescriptions found in the change management literature. One action card suggests one-on-ones with those of the employes who appeared worried about the change, while another card proposes standardizing work processes to give the employes a clearer idea of their tasks. Again, each card results in a reaction whereby employes move in or out of resistance. The cycle of gear choice followed by leadership actions repeats for all three of the above-mentioned phases of change. In total, the game exposes learning subjects to six turns of decision-making. Between decision-making sessions, the facilitators ask questions aimed at making them associate the occurrences in the game with their personal experiences.

The simulation provides a perspective on business reality that is eventually quite alien to the practices it represents. Though the simulation's focus is on the emotional and relational aspects of managerial practice, it represents this phenomenon only in abstraction. Rather than making change management a visceral experience, it provides an occasion for imagining change management to play out. One could also argue that the game resonates with managerial practice quite well, at least to the extent that much managerial work actually consists of making-decisions in a space mediated by abstract models, text, and data aggregates (Law 2002). To this end, Wallbreakers resonates with a practice world already mediated by simulacra and imagination.

Across the different elements of Wallbreakers, we have found a range of material figures. The figure of a three-phased change process. Figures of resistance. Figures of choice. Figures of

employes. Figures of departments. Yet, it appears the game also projects a figure-form that is ephemeral rather than tangible, namely the figure-form of the change agent. A change agent is an idealized business figure, a trope widely used in the change management literature (see, for example, Kotter 1996). A change agent carries the responsibility of managing change and protects the change against the risks of failure and resistance. Wallbreakers does not figure the change agent in any tangible or visible form. Instead, the game produces an artificial reality, which challenges the business subject to perform the role of change agents themselves. To succeed in the game, learning subjects must strive to embody this figure-form. Through the game setup, learning subjects become sensitive to this figure-form, affording them to reflect on their own managerial accomplishments in relation to this. However, the ideal is virtually impossible to achieve, as a perfect score would demand either a great deal of luck or numerous systematic experimental runs through the game. This way, the game challenges learning subjects to strive towards embodying an unrealizable 'exemplary' figure-form, a common mobilizing attractor of anthropotechniques (Sloterdijk 2013, p. 23). Wallbreakers thereby presents a range of figures, which in different ways offer vehicles for provoking change management reality, both as a thing in the organization and as a managerial ideal.

Figuration – coupling figurines to discourses

In Wallbreakers, the game artifacts serve to demarcate the game world. The core artifacts are the game board, the busses, the employe figurines, the booklets, and action/gear cards. The game designer expresses that he hopes the game will leave subjects with a 'common language' for change management. When observing the game material, it becomes apparent that the figurines and artifacts act as carriers and conveyers of this 'common language.' The 'common language' consists of a set of key metaphors, including 'gear,' 'three levels of resistance' and 'three phases of change.' In constructing these metaphors, the designers sought inspiration in a set of theories and frameworks generally recognized and used in present-day organizations. For instance, they attribute the model of resistance to management consultant Maurer (1996). Maurer resides in the prescriptive literature and practitioners frequently draw on his work. The inclusion of Maurer adds a potential of resonance for those who have already familiarized themselves with the prescriptive literature.

Coupling Maurer to the game took some creative effort though. Citing Gestalt psychology as his own primary source of inspiration, Maurer (1996, p. 42) argues that the three levels of resistance are interconnected phenomena 'always in flux.' In his book, *Beyond the Wall of Resistance* he depicted the mental model as three interconnected circles (See Figure 3).

However, a flux metaphor lacks clarity and makes an impractical foundation for a board game. To overcome this problem, the designers translated Maurer's figure of resistance into a figure of three clearly demarcated stacked layers depicted on the road pavement. By translating the image of resistance from one of flux into a stable object of separately demarcated hierarchical fields, the designers had opened the possibility of attributing a dimension of spatial distance to the phenomenon of resistance. In other words, a more entrenched form of resistance, like not trusting the change, lies farther from the bus than, say, simply not understanding the change. The figure provides a mental image of resistance as a place people go to, but also as a cognitive and emotional state attributed to the individual's state of mind. Hence, the coupling of Maurer to the game is also a decoupling from the original text. The model now has a spatial quality and a strict internal logic.

The origin of the three phases of change follows a somewhat similar path. The game was initially designed as a four-phased model following a standard from a then collaborating consultancy. However, as Workz ran the game, they learned that four phases created a 'bad flow' and therefore decided to reduce the number of phases to three. Ironically, a three-phased change model is the industry standard for change management, so the figure has ultimately assimilated established organizational standards (Rosenbaum *et al.* 2018). The example of the three-phased figure of change demonstrates another element of business figuration. The designers carefully monitor

Three levels of resistance

(Maurer 1996, p. 42)
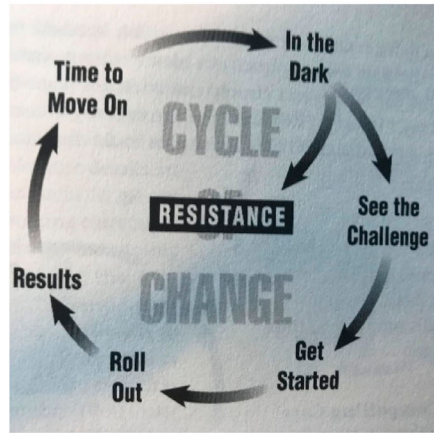
Cycle of Change

(Maurer 1996, p. 25)
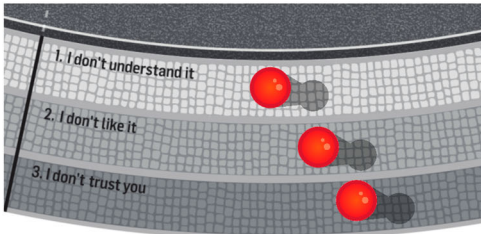
Wallbreakers Game Board

Close-up of the three levels of resistance

(Workz 2017)

Wallbreakers Game Board

Three phases of change

(Workz 2017)

Figure 3. Juxtaposed figures of resistance and change from Wallbreakers and Maurer.

how different iterations of the simulacrum affect social interactions. When an element fails to meet the objective of the design, the designers tweak or remov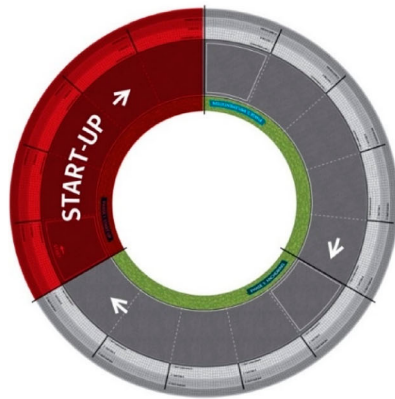e it. Thus, the designers shape the business simulacrum in accordance with established change management discourse and circulating business models, but in a way that is amenable to change and translation depending on how well it performs.

A final example of the coupling of language and material is the plastic bus and the accompanying gear cards. These figures stand out from the rest, as the designers have not derived these from any authoritative source or available business discourse. The reason for their existence seems to originate from the natural requirements of building a game. Simply put, the designers needed something that moved to illustrate progress in the game. With this in mind, they found the two metaphors intuitive and thus justifiable to incorporate. The designers sourced these metaphors from local dialect. In Danish, bus metaphors can connote development. A person who is 'at the front of the bus' (*fremme i bussen*) is an idiom for someone at the forefront of new development. In a Danish context, the bus metaphor tangentially connects with the theme of change

management. During a Wallbreakers instructor training session, we heard the consultant explain that they found the bus metaphor easy for people to understand regardless of nationality. The ease with which the metaphor functions in a Danish context obviously shifts when the technology goes abroad, where the bus metaphor becomes a novelty. However, as the figure of the bus still stands, the metaphor has proven to travel well, and therefore the designers allow its presence in the business simulacrum. In this example, we see how sourcing discourse for the purpose of figuration, may go beyond the confinements of business discourse.

The game designer noted he learned early on that businesses often use models and frameworks that are well suited for game world incorporation. Game design becomes a way of reintroducing existing business simulacra, through processes of decoupling and translation. Baudrillard's (1981/1994) notion of the hyperreal comes to mind, as we note that the design process consists constructing simulacra of simulacra. The gamified business simulacra alter and intensify the business simulacra's significance in the contained space of the educational exercise.

Figuration by indication and neglect

The figures materialize the learning content, rendering an augmented business reality, in an inherently specific and consistent way. As the figures mainly are translations of popular models and tropes circulating in the consultancy industry, the simulation reflects a business reality rendering, already available in popular business discourse. Though the simulation has taken a form which learning subjects tend to accept as intuitive and accessible depictions of change management, one could also note that the designers could have figured change management differently. Designing a consistent simulacrum appears to be in favor of the neglect of alternatives. We will explore this observation in the paragraphs below.

Surveying the peer-reviewed academic literature on resistance to change, one notices that the concept has taken many shapes. Resistance could have been figured as tensions between differing 'force-fields' or collisions between 'life-spaces' (Lewin 1945), as mobilization with both destructive and productive potentials (Zoller and Fairhurst 2007) or a potential that resides not only in change recipients, but also in change promoters (Randall and Procter 2008). A similar point can be made about the three-phased change, which has been keenly challenged in the organizational literature (Chia 1999). Through its design, the simulation allows a select few change management perspectives to take effect. In doing so, the simulation neglects the existence of a complex of alternative perspectives. This could be regarded as a lack of sophistication on the part of the consultancy, yet it does not seem to recognize this as a relevant problem. At a product demonstration, we heard the consultancy's CEO tell clients that he was well aware of the disputes regarding personality assessment technologies, and that MBTI might not be the most scientifically valid personality assessment instrument available. However, he found it to be more important that clients recognize the game's content than for the game to remain true to some authoritative scientific paradigm. The consultancy use MBTI as their framework for building game characters, because it is the technology most frequently used to classify personality types in today's businesses. In the figures' evolutionary competition for survival, their capacity to mediate conversations trumps epistemic authority. There appears to be a design principle that relates to deliberate neglect. By neglecting any perspectives on the subject matter other than the select few proven readily acceptable to clients, the game grants its users a singular perspective on business reality.

Indication, rather than detailed explication, seems to be another design principle driving the simulacrum assemblage. The CEO of Workz deploys the metaphor of the 'the eye of the dragon' when formulating how to engage people in 'co-authoring' narratives of their situations, problems, and solutions (Agger 2016). The eye of the dragon refers to a dramaturgical film effect of building suspense by merely indicating the dreaded creature rather than revealing it in full figure. Compelling the audience to fill in the blanks themselves, this dramaturgic technique can elicit a stronger affect than a full visual explication. Levels of resistance, busses, and phases are indicative signs,

figures that communicate just enough for the learning subjects to project their own imagined reality onto them. During play, learning subjects must imagine figured employes' motivations and reactions to imagined consequences of their imagined decisions. By coupling the game's responses with the learning subjects' own experiences, the figures can catalyze discussions of, how the problematics in the game reflect the organization's current situation.

The aim of the game designer is to provide 'a learning experience,' he explains. The game must trigger personally relevant reflection and talk. Drawing on Lyotard, it is by virtue of the learning subjects' figure–matrix that the simulacrum comes to life. The game figures suggest the existence of certain managerial phenomena, and provide objects through which managers can express their doubts. Thereby, the figures help to both articulate managerial problems and contain them, for the purpose of collective inquiry. Ambiguity in the significance of the figures is not a problem. It is a mobilizing property. The figures afford the learning subjects to 'throw' their subconscious onto them (Lyotard 1971/2011, pp. 281–282). The game designer articulates this as the need to couple the discussions during the game with the learning subject's context. 'The game is just the game,' the designer explains, continuing, 'the questions [the facilitator] poses have to be relevant to the context.' It is through the association of figures and the learning subjects' experience that their learning happens, we are told. Reality is not absent during the simulation. Rather, learning subjects and consultants narrate reality into existence, and in this process augment it through its association with carefully arranged talk around suggestive game figures.

Approximation through distancing – between the infantile, the critical, and the ironic

The style of figuration in Wallbreakers connotes both a degree of irony and infantilism. Plastic busses, game board, and play pieces add ludic connotations to the educational exercise. Though the training technology has been designed to provoke articulations of managerial problems, serious matters, the exercise unfolds in a ludic atmosphere. The consultants themselves do not engage in childish acts, but perform their part as befits ordinary business. Neither do they expect the learning subjects to participate in infantile performances, as seen in other leadership development programs (Muniesa 2017). Instead, the material performs a ludic atmosphere for them, leaving space for the consultants and learning subjects to perform the arrangement in ways that imitate the regular business activity of decision-making. Likewise, the facilitators usually wear business suits when facilitating the game, which adds an element of seriousness to the atmosphere. The peculiar mix of ludic and serious frame creates an ambiguous atmosphere of an act apart from both pastime games and strict goal-oriented business. Wallbreakers blurs the boundary between the frivolous and the serious. This peculiar frame contributes to the arrangement of an act apart, 'a magic circle' (Huizinga 1949) as a means of stepping out of the 'river of habits' Sloterdijk (2013). Staging an abnormal space for contemplation allows learning subjects to relate to the normal in abnormal ways. When arranged appropriately, the act apart may even serve to catapult the learning subject them from one plateau of comprehension to the next.

Another way of distancing the learning subjects from the habitual business reality is through the ironic tone of the video clip used to start the game. In the video clip (see Figure 2), the CEO of the largest of the merging companies announces the merger to the staff. The purpose of the video is to frame and dramatize the simulation and its narrative, similar to the use of a cut scene in a video-game. The video clip has a seemingly high production value, illustrating the consultancy's roots in the film industry but also implying that, though the arrangement connotes playfulness, the designers have put in substantial resources, which indicates that learning subjects ought to take it seriously. In the video clip, the CEO has a few rhetorical hiccups, which seem deliberately designed to both amuse and spur critical dialogue. For example, we observed that the video typically elicited titters when the CEO states that the merger will cause 'a considerable overlap [of employees].' The CEO seems to figure the unscrupulous businessperson hidden behind glossy business rhetoric. The video clip resonates well with the watcher's cynicism towards the business world

Figure 4. Screenshot from launch video with fictional CEO.

and its rhetoric: 'Typical management bullshit' as one manager uttered as an immediate response to the video. Yet, the dark side of the business is represented in a comedic form, leaving the figure of management somewhere between the scrupulous, the ridiculous, and the fake. The fictional CEO resembles a stereotypical businessperson, a bad boss, who can be both intimidating to those caught in his dominion, but also comes off as a fool, unable to perform his part convincingly, tingeing every act with hypocrisy.

What does this kind of figuration afford in the setting of managerial education? The purpose of the video clip is to make the simulation come alive. Its ironic twist also invites a certain way of talking about change management and the learning subjects' stake in it. The video offers the learning subjects a moment to reflect on familiar concerns in business reality, in a form that appears both realistic and absurd. The video allows participants to project their annoyance onto the fictitious CEO, thus opening for critical debate. The video functions as an invitation to approach one's personal business reality from a different perspective allowing learning subjects to recognize and articulate their problems and frustrations with the mediation of a humorous figure of management. With the video, business problems become a caricature, something to chuckle at, but presented in a game frame that simultaneously urges participants to articulate and deal with it. The video clip provides a potential for a moment of catharsis,[2] a catalyst for further critical discussions on power relations, hypocrisy, and paradoxes – topics often subjected to organizational silence. Breaking with the usual rendering of reality becomes a means of approaching the painful and tabooed aspects of reality. Through its humorous, surreal, and dramatized figuration of business, the games intend to make business problematization fun (see Figure 4).

Provoking a sense of doubt

Game designers often refer to the concept of game mechanics and learning mechanics to talk about the elements in the game technology that are meant to facilitate learning (Blumberg *et al.* 2013). Learning mechanics can be instructions, such as the taxonomy and the esthetics of resistance to change in Wallbreakers. Feedback is another essential mechanism, as when a simulation intends to teach something by gratifying or castigating the learning subject in response to their in-game

behavior. Lastly, designers consider facilitated reflection and discussion on the game events crucial for learning. Overall, Wallbreakers seems to follow the schematics of learning games. Yet, Wallbreakers manifests the mechanics in a specific way, following the logic of trying to provoke self-doubt.

The game rewards learning subjects when they satisfy the game's normative script. In a sense, every game response is a normative claim on a choice as good or bad, and the game ultimately punishes learning subjects who fail to satisfy the game's prescription. In the words of the game designer, 'The game kicks back.' This binary teaching method, right and wrong, echoes a learning paradigm of behaviorism. However, the goal is not just to imprint a set of right and wrongs. The designers intend the learning subjects to use the kicks they receive to start discussions about real problems. During discussions, the consultants ask for explanations for choices and give their feedback on the fallout. The facilitator asks the learning subjects to infer from the game how their choices reflect their real-world situation and habits of thinking and acting. The consultants try to get the learning subjects to explore the organizational reality through the game's figures and the game's normative claims. This way, the learning subjects' experiences become associated with the game's figures and mechanics. The kicks encourage the learning subjects to throw their personally held concerns onto the game figures, which in turn gives form to the concerns, making them appear somewhat similar - heterogeneous manager–employe issues categorized as resistance, for instance. This way, the game's figures provide a shared perspective for the learning participants to discuss their issues. The game designer thinks of this design as machinery: 'The game is like an engine with which we, in a controlled manner and within a timeframe, can get people to talk about a specific subject.'

Lastly, the designers consider the construction of paradoxical decision-making situations particularly effective for disrupting learning subjects' narratives. One way of doing this is to ask learning subjects to solve tasks with two diametrically opposing aims. The gear card constructs a bi-directional concern, a paradox, as it epitomizes the game's challenge; implementing a change quickly while ensuring that the current level of productivity remains intact. The designers have constructed the game mechanics so that any choice results in a substantial number of employes move to a state of resistance. Whatever the subject does, it will have negative consequences. Furthermore, employes in resistance adds complication to the task, as the employes have individual needs. The game thereby exposes the subjects to problems, which have no single optimal solution. This way, the designers have refined the game mechanics with the aim of resonating with the complex and paradoxical daily struggles of real world change management. 'You are going to encounter resistance, whatever you do,' the designer explains. This is the business condition he has meant to convey. He elaborates, that an objective of the simulation is to make the learning subjects, think 'What is it I'm doing wrong?'

Findings

In the analysis, we examined the business simulation, Wallbreakers. This revealed a set of design principles that has guided the designers' assemblage of the game. The analysis showed how the core of the learning arrangement was located in the game figures and how the performative potential resides in the mechanics and techniques that accompany these figures. The designers have created figures that are more indicative and abstract than naturalistic, to allow the learning subjects' imagination to take part in the articulation of change management. The figuration processes leading to Wallbreakers involved translation of established canonical texts and models and already naturalized business simulacra. To this end, the designers sourced popular business discourse, providing both inspiration for the game's categories and intellectual legitimacy. The simulation achieves consistency and uniformity by including only a few select renderings while neglecting the alternatives. The figuration process morphs the sourced discourse into figures and attaches them to the conventions of ludic design. Thereby, Wallbreakers fortifies and energizes already established simulacra of change management.

The figures provide a framework for thinking of, and observing a business reality. Part of the learning objective is for the subjects to become sensitive to this reality representation. Furthermore, the game pushes learning subjects into making suboptimal managerial decisions, a set-up for learning subjects to problematize themselves, each other, and the organization. The game utilizes mechanics that set the learning subject up for inevitable failure, fertilizing the grounds for explorative discussions and introspection. This mechanism affords the learning subjects to connect personal problematic experiences and discuss them under uniting figures presented in the game. The designers intend the dilemmas to provoke a sense of doubt and allow for its articulation.

Wallbreakers presents us with a peculiar mix of the popular, the infantile, the ironic, and the critical. This alternative skew on business reality stages an act apart, designed to challenge the learning subject's regular ways of thinking. As a playful way of unveiling business problems, Wallbreakers is an example of what can happen when the creative industry meets the conventional business world. It is a precarious manifestation of the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999/2007), which lends its existence to ideas and techniques that otherwise, resides in arts and entertainment. On par with the constraints put on filmmakers during the Dogma movement, which unleashed creative potentials through provocative obstructions, Wallbreakers provokes learning subjects to articulate problems in the refracted reflection of the simulacrum's magic mirror, the eye of the dragon. A fine-tuned provocative machine that lures the figure–matrix to throw itself at it, allowing the revelation of the suppressed by tunneling its expression.

Through its translations of business discourse, mechanics, and techniques, Wallbreakers intends to push learning subjects into a contemplative and transformative process aimed at making them want to realize themselves in the image of the exemplary figure of the change agent. In the function of a modern despiritualized anthropotechnique, that urge business subjects to change their lives (Sloterdijk 2013), the case of Wallbreakers presents us an example of how provocative techniques are used to fuel these training processes. Ultimately, it is a characteristic of the simulacrum that 'It problematizes reality' (Muniesa 2014, p. 23).

Discussion

What can Lyotard's theorization on figure and discourse add to examinations on the performativity of business simulacra? Lyotard offers a perspective on the simulacrum that specifies and broadens the space of its performativity. The triadic model of figures highlights how the performativity of an image or a business model, a simulacrum, ties to discourse, other resembling forms, and the deep configuration of the perceiver's subconscious. With the notion of figure–matrix, Lyotard couples sensitivities from psychoanalysis to the assessment of the simulacrum's performativity stressing the influence of properties like the unrealized real, psychic projections, desire, and fantasy. Lyotard (1971/2011) expands on the process of figurality by emphasizing that projection of the subconscious onto image–figures is not a pure process. Contamination happens when the subconscious articulates itself through the mediation of a figure–image. The figure–image co-constitutes the figure–matrix as it offers a frame for containing its projection, but it occurs in a process, which fundamentally distorts the figure–matrix. Figures exist in what Lyotard (1971/2011, p. 50) calls a 'figural space,' an event between figure–image and observer that fusses the parties (Callan and Williams 2011). A space without sharp boundaries between sign and signified, signification, and designation. A space which connects the three states of figures (Lyotard 1971/2011, p. 129). The figural space enables the figure–image to convey more potential of meaning, than any discourse of pre-defined meaning ever could. In the figural space, figures dynamically and mutually exploit each other as the significance of the event emerges. Any line, color, suggestive associations to discourse, or shortcomings of representational accuracy of the figure–image, is an invitation to the figure–matrix to reveal itself differently. By conceptualizing the business simulacrum through the Lyotardian framework of figure and discourse, we can grow more sensitive to how designers assemble business simulacra, not only to condense and express discourse but also, how they may find

ways of attaching the business simulacrum to the 'originary repression' of the figure–matrix (Lyotard 1971/2011, p. 268). Ludic simulacra, like those observed in Wallbreakers come to enact the role of transitional objects (Winnicott 1971), substitutes of the actual, bridges to the repressed, and tools for coping with the anxiety of business reality. Simultaneously, ludic figures can serve as provocateurs of the real, mobilizing anxiety, which can be another vehicle for learning (Muniesa 2020). This style of thinking brings new caveats to our way of thinking about the performativity of business simulacra as it affords sensitivity to the vibrant space between the perceiver, the perceived, and the techniques through which simulacra take a seat in business subjectivities.

Following Muniesa's proposal that we must study simulacra to understand business realization (Muniesa 2014), the current paper has considered the relevance of introducing Lyotard's conceptualization of the figure into the conversation. The introduction of Lyotard's (1971/2011) theory of figure and discourse adds to the debates on business simulacra, and provides a vocabulary, and a set of sensitivities to consider when examining business simulacra's performativity. This provides a perspective that allows us to see simulacra as unfolding events occurring in the space between the representation, the represented, the perceiver and available discourses, affording us to expand and specify the space in which we perceive the business simulacrum to operate. The paper suggests that the work of Lyotard offers more to performativity studies than has already been credited.

Notes

1. See appendix 1 for an overview of the used data.
2. Psychiatrist and existential psychotherapist Viktor Frankl (1959) referred to the concept of 'paradoxical intention' in his logotherapy. He promoted the idea of humor as a therapeutic technique for exposing patients to fear provoking objects. The therapist should arrange situations in which the patient would *want* to face the feared. As Frankl (1959, p. 128) described it, humor sparks the 'human capacity for self-detachment' and with this 'the patient is enabled to put himself at a distance from his own neurosis.'

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Overview of data sources in use
  Although more data sources were available, the current article draws on the following data from the research project.

- Interviews with two consultants from consultancy
- Interview with one game designer
- Observations of promotional events with clients – three full-day events
- Participant observation of facilitator training at consultancy
- Reading of facilitator guide and examination of game material
- Reading of materials, books, and book chapters published by the consultancy members