The power of play

Pat Kane

Pat Kane argues that workers in post-industrial societies are moving away from the work ethic, towards more playful, but also potentially more caring, forms of activity.

We - and by 'we' I mean the richer nations of the world - are in a state of crisis about work: about what we do when we work, what it does to us when we work, even what the very nature of work is. There are some major themes on the crisis of work that have become clear over the last five years:

♦ *Work isn't making us happy* - Richard Layard's book *Happiness*, published in the UK (Penguin 2005), and Clive Hamilton's *Affluenza*, published in Australia (Allen and Unwin 2006), both highlight how the prodigious post-war ascent in levels of GDP in the countries of the richer parts of the world has been accompanied by a steady flatlining of reported levels of happiness (with Japan and Sweden as interesting anomalies to this). Beyond a certain level of income, relative to spending power, we don't get that much happier the richer we get. We may well have become more productive (both by using new technology *and* increasing our working hours). But the extra fruits of our labours - the consumerist model of house, car, holidays, malls, treats and toys (adult as well as childish) - do not seem to bring us greater happiness and meaning. If so, what's the point?

♦ *Work is making us unhealthy* - There's a huge amount of recent research on

this. Michael Marmot's Whitehall Study on the British Civil Service, with a data-set of over 10,000 subjects, tracked over forty years to the present day, reveals that those civil servants with more choice, autonomy, resources and decision-making power in their jobs live considerably longer than those with less decision-making power. This latter group are much more prone to the onset of ill-health. (Marmot assesses that only a third of this differential is due to more self-abusive lifestyles in the lower ranks - smoking, drinking, etc.) This, to me, is a more devastating point than the usual, and correct, complaint about the overall-rise in working hours, and the consequent stresses, indebtedness and strained family relations. The inequalities of power and status that most of us might accept as the somewhat tedious price of working for a stable organisation are, literally, toxic and death-dealing.

♦ *Work is making us confused* - There is a crisis of identity. What does it mean to be a good or respected worker these days? This is a crisis of what we've come to know as 'the work ethic'. Again, a huge body of research details a broadening and deepening disaffection with this legacy of Puritanism and the industrial revolution. There is a widespread reaction against the attitude that work diligently performed, no matter the extent to which it expresses the talents or sensibility of the worker, is the minimum badge of social respectability.

♦ As Richard Sennett notes in *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (Yale 2006), diligence and commitment to a particular task or craft - one dignity that adherence to the work ethic afforded - is no longer respected, in the flexible and endlessly adaptive modern company. Yet the sheer acrobatics involved in that 'new work' - where individual self-reliance (on a short-term contract) is invoked in the service of an often asphyxiating corporate 'vision' - is hardly a more attractive alternative. The rise of 'stress' as a factor in our working lives is due to this lurch from a 'work ethic' to an 'enterprise ethic'. Madeleine Bunting, writing in *The Guardian* back in January 2003, notes that, in the UK, the number of days lost to individual 'sickies' in the late 1990s and early 2000s, is actually greater than the total number of days lost to collective strikes in the dreaded early 1970s. The crisis of the work ethic is easily summed up in one sentence. Why believe in work, when it doesn't really believe in you?

All these elements add up to a general crisis of meaning and purpose, for countries whose leaders and establishments believe that the most stable social identity available comes through work. Let's try to imagine an answer to these crises. The first thing I want to do is to rub out the word 'work', and replace it with a clunkier term like 'valuable activity'. What is the 'valuable activity' that could make us happier, make us healthier and make us clearer in our minds (rather than confused) about who we are, and what we want?

The power of play

The first thing to say about play is that it's not what you think it is. Or, to be exact, it's much *more* than you think it is. For most of us, at the level of daily speech, play is what children do, or what adults do sometimes in sport, or at parties. For some of us, play connotes the idea of creativity (as in theatre and music), or enterprise and strategy (as in politics and business). For a certain younger generation - and increasingly beyond them - play is what they largely do with their interactive technologies and communication devices.

Play is actually an extremely pervasive and elemental term in our language. We easily move from what we think is its most obvious definition (the mere activity of children) to something which is, to use an extremely Scottish word, epistemological - that is, play as a way of framing what counts as true in our material and social world. And beyond that, our meanings become even cosmic or spiritual. Most creation myths are acts of play - the sheer gratuity of 'Let there be light' in genesis; the dice tumbling from the hands of Mahabarata; the permanent play of forms and connections in Hinduism and Buddhism.

The reason why play travels so promiscuously across our worlds of meaning goes all the way back to the child at play. For without play, we simply would not develop as advanced mammals. In a very direct and causal way, play enables the entire human condition. The psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith, in *The Ambiguity of Play* (Harvard, 1997), says that for humans (and mammals), play is 'adaptive potentiation'. It describes the kind of things we see our children do in their play spaces and play times. The density of our infant brains, the weakness of our infant bodies, and the complexity of our relationships with other young humans, means that we need a zone in our early years in which we can literally test out all this sophisticated biological and psychological equipment.

The need to play is so strong that the more complex adult mammals ensure

that there are play times, play spaces and play resources - a patch of protected ground, supplies of food, maybe even materials - to enable this development through play to happen. And the end point of human play, its outcome, has been our species dominance on this planet, through our sheer capability and flexibility as organisms. If play is so constitutive of our humanity, the psychological and biological starting-point of all our complexities and capacities, why do we think that at a certain stage in our development, we must stop playing, 'put childish things behind us', become non-playful, perhaps working adults? I think the elemental key to this lies in the relationship between play and scarcity, or (the same thing) play and abundance.

The young mammal at play needs the labouring adult mammal to provide the resources for play, whether that's defence of territory or basic sustenance. That is, developmental play occurs best in an environment which *is some distance from immediate survival* - even if the skills learned in play (hunting, status management, various ingenuities of perception) are skills that will help the mammal contribute to basic survival, her own and her progeny, when she is older. The further we move from scarcity as human animals, through our capacity to 'do more with less' through the application of science and technology, the more opportunity we have to extend the moment of play throughout our adult lives.

Play isn't leisure

In my understanding of the word, play is not leisure - if we understand 'leisure' to be that compensatory activity we conduct after our 'necessary labours' have been completed, a 're-creation' of our exploited selves in order to return to our duties. If play is 'adaptive potentiation' - that is, the spinning-out of possibilities, experiments and imaginings to ensure our continuing development and adaptability - then our play is as 'necessary' to our survival (and thrival) as our work. The problem with the leisure society vision is that it usually presumed a kind of well-managed, semi-bureaucratic, 'steady' state, with productive automation of various kinds purring away in the background, and usually an alarmingly homogenous population living in quiet consensus.

Yet, as we know, our societies have become far more conflictual, disruptive, emergent and surprising than the leisure theorists could ever have imagined. In the face of the challenges presented by feminism, environmentalism,

fundamentalism, monetarism, globalism and informationalism, the last thing our response could ever be is 'leisurely'. We need to be players in this accelerating world, not idlers or strollers or contemplatives.

'Why are they so unhappy?'

I occasionally consult to large organisations in the private and public sectors. And I often have some sympathy for the senior managers and executives I talk to, as they try to respond to the levels of unhappiness, discontent and lack of motivation that they face in their workforces, who are often operating under conditions which - seen from the perspective of the leisure society theorists of the 1970s - might seem like a partly-achieved utopia. And, seen from the perspective of working conditions in the first half of the twentieth century, they might seem like a real one. 'What can we do to address these issues?' I am asked. 'What else can we do?' My response is rarely satisfying to them - which is why I'm only an occasional consultant. (Or a deconsultant, as I often call myself - someone who goes into an organisation, unravels everything into a fertile mess, and is rarely invited back.)

What I usually say is that they are facing a workforce whose very twenty-first century skills - the ability to communicate well and respond empathetically, to respond nimbly and enterprisingly to new tasks, to use networks with ease to collaborate with others and inform themselves - are not skills that can be ultimately be harnessed to the ends or goals of any organisation. These are the skills of the *ars de vivre*, of the arts of life themselves.

This is a workforce which is not just better educated, healthier and longer-lived, but which also has access to an ethical perspective on their organisations - the product of feminism, environmentalism and increasingly spirituality - which they find difficult to bracket off from their day-to-day activities and work duties. Their discontent is a discontent of sheer potential: what do I do with my life, my capacities? What is my purpose? Is this the right place, with the right structure and the right people, to manifest that? Material abundance has generated ethical anxiety, not complacency.

Again, after all that, the executive will come back to me again: 'so what *can* I do then?' My response is to suggest that they recognise that this restlessness comes from a very deep place - the place of play, that wiring which compels to explore, self-develop and potentiate, whenever we feel we have sufficient distance from necessity (and, for most of us in the richest parts of the world, that is a

steadily increasing distance).

So, I propose, could they consider turning part of their workspaces into playgrounds? By which I don't mean a 'leisure' or 'recreation' space, the pool table or Playstation machine in the games room. But actually offering up the resources, both human and technical, of the organisation to support the diversive explorations, the adaptive potentiations, the developmental play, of their staff - whether relevant to the company's overall directives or not.

It's at this point the conversation usually peters out, with everyone rushing from my playshop to get back to their groaning in-boxes and time-shifted meetings. In my experience, it's a rare organisation which can face down their accountants and shareholders, or (if in the public sector) their political masters, and genuinely respond to the crisis of working values - or, looked at from my perspective, the renaissance of play values - that's happening within their workforce. It seems to be a limit within conventional forms of organisation, that they can rarely imagine that they exist in a condition of abundance - whether of material or human resources.

At one level - the micro, bottom-up level - there is much evidence of a broad culture of substantive play, manifesting itself through our active use of interactive technology, our diverse pop cultures, and our 'lifestyle militancy' about nurturance and self-development. Yet there is another level - the macro, top-down level - which is also promising. At least in some of the richer parts of the world, particularly Europe, some legislators and statespeople are becoming aware that the 'grounds of play' can only be secured by regulation and policy. The state becomes an active supporter - and more importantly, a legitimator - of a variety of forms of valuable human activity, not just those which can be commodified. The state thus ensures that the full range of adaptive potentiations that humans might pursue, *are* pursued - and not just those edited and selected by a marketplace.

Examples of this might be the tenaciously maintained 35-hour week in France, which has resulted notoriously in both an increase in leisure and self-improvement activities (without reduction of overall economic productivity), and in a baby boom (a non-marketplace activity which speaks for itself). Holland's policies on social 'flexicurity' - where part-time work is given exactly the same status in protection, rights and hourly rates as full-time work - allows for a rich mix of activities (both economic and social, familial and recreational).

Scandinavian examples of strong state support of citizens' autonomy - from Finland's free high quality education system, from primary to university, to the income supplements and sabbatical allowances built into labour law in Sweden, Denmark and Norway - are legion. Yet none of these schemes are themselves sufficient to address the aspirations of a players' identity: more radical, less conditional schemes - such as the variety of basic income or basic capital options, as suggested by writers like Claus Offe or Bruce Ackerman - might be more appropriate (though as yet untried in practice). If these pressures at the micro and the macro level can intensify, it is possible that daily life in our institutions and enterprises will more lastingly change.

But what I want to stress very strongly is that these organisational changes *are impeded by the very vocabulary of work itself.* The cultural and historical weight of work - particularly the legacy of Puritanism - means that it is a poor and crude description of the subtle range of creative actions that we actually pursue, and would want to pursue more intensely, in our information-age organisations. And the ethical residue of work - that sense of duty to others, the notion of 'good works' - I think should be properly called 'care', rather than bound up in a term which can make our altruism and empathy seem like a functional necessity. So between 'play' and 'care', in my view, we can get rid of the term 'work' altogether. And with that mind-forg'd manacle loosened, we can begin to devise institutions and organisations that respond to our growing sense of genuine playfulness.

How many ways to play?

Sutton-Smith has outlined what he regards as the seven major 'rhetorics' of play - the main ways in which play has been valued in human culture. He divides them into the modern and ancient rhetorics of play:

Modern

  Play as progress - we adapt and develop through play
  Play as selfhood - play as an expression of voluntary freedom
  Play as imaginary - play as symbolic transformation, mental energy

Ancient

  Play as power - we contest and compete with others - in sports and games, in
  theatres of power

Play as identity - the play-forms we use to confirm membership in a community - carnival, ritual, festival

Play as fate and chaos - the sense that we are played by forces greater than ourselves, not accessible to reason

Play as frivolity - play as laughter, subversion, tomfoolery

A significant amount of human social order is expressed through these rhetorics of play. The ancient play-themes are as alive in our existences as the modern ones. If there is a more philosophical definition of play that unites these rhetorics, it comes from Friedrich von Schiller, author of the first great play theory, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794). Schiller said that play means to 'take reality lightly'. The etymological root of play is even more appropriate, from the Indo-European *-dlegh*, meaning 'to engage, to exercise yourself'.

Certainly, those first five rhetorics - play as self-development, play as voluntary will, play as imagination, play as power, play as identity - seem like the skill-set of the very best enterprises we could conceive. And what is powerful about the remaining two rhetorics - play as fate, play as frivolity - is that they are an in-built caution to the over-confidence or presumptiveness of the preceding five.

I have attempted a 'play audit' of organisations, using these seven rhetorics, among non-executive-level workforces. But often the very constrictions of these organisations, whether it's their hierarchy or corporate identity or strategic goals, means that (at the end of my audit) workers can become incredibly dissatisfied with their existing conditions. (Again, fulfilling my role as a deconsultant …) The audit either shows up how much they are maxing out on certain kinds of play (often identity and power, in terms of a competitive corporate identity); how they are impoverished in some forms (say, play as freedom and as imagination, in terms of the unengaging and uninspiring nature of their tasks); and are positively toxic in others (play as frivolity, translating as the darkest office humour and parody).

But I still think the rhetorics - or some other typology of playful activities conducted beyond scarcity - would be a useful tool for any start-up organisation, whether a commercial or social enterprise, particularly one that accepted the player-nature of their employees/stakeholders, and that wanted to ensure every possibility for 'adaptive potentiation' was being nurtured throughout the design of their company, and its product or service. I live in hope.

The techno-politics of play

Information and communications technology (ICT), as it is applied and used within traditionally-structured organisations, doesn't just replace routine human mental labour; it also over-works and over-controls those humans who remain. But thankfully, ICT does not begin and end in the organisation. Indeed, in terms of participation, local custom, and the transmission of traditions and forms, cyberculture is one of the most powerful and authentic 'folk' cultures ever created.

The World Wide Web was originally conceived as a 'play' technology by Tim-Berners Lee - a way for scientists to play brain tennis with each other's papers and documents, across long distances. Much of the essential architecture of the internet has been created by enthusiastic programmer amateurs, who then gifted their creations to the electronic commonwealth. The most notable, and explicitly playful, of these was Linus Torvalds, who created the operating system Linux in the early 1990s as a post-grad student, which has now grown into a low-or-no-cost alternative to Microsoft, embraced by giants like China and Brazil.

Cyberculture is deeply congruent with the notion of play as a possibility generator, helping us to survive and thrive by generating potential options. Net culture is, I would assert, one of the first authentic institutional responses to our emerging play-identity. Its implicit ethos is the creation of robust, repairable, reliable collective infrastructures, which nevertheless allow and encourage a multitude of enterprises and initiatives from the individuals and groups that use them. It is almost directly analogous with that mammalian play moment I discussed earlier.

The internet is just like that defensible, well-resourced space for young complex mammals, protected by responsible guardians (which, at least up until this point, the elders of cyberspace - the hacker priesthood - have largely been), within which much developmental frolicking, testing and experimenting can take place. Now we *could* argue about how much playful development is actually occurring in cyberspace … but I think the analogy still holds.

We have to develop an educated consciousness that can cope with the technological outcomes of our playful imaginations. We have to be able to sift through those systems that empower and enrich our sense of agency (and if possible, proactively design these), and those which make us passive, dissatisfied, fruitlessly envious.

This imperative is most acute in the case of the computer-games industry - an incredibly powerful tool for literacy, enabling the disciplined imagining and simulation of possible futures. However, in terms of content, games are currently trapped at the level of the penny-dreadful and the sensationalist novel - or worse, as in the case of the US Army, used as a scarily congruent recruiting tool. Yet the play-ethical response to games should not be one that demonises the play-form itself, but a concerted effort by the humanities and institutions of education to provide a non-commercial space for the development of alternative contents and uses.

'cyber culture is deeply congruent with the notion of play as possibility generator, helping us to thrive by generating options'

What's extraordinary about the play-space of cyberculture is that it has, quite spontaneously and emergently, returned some very familiar old values back to the mainstream: the idea of a commonwealth, or what Lawrence Lessig in *The Future of Ideas* (Vintage 2002) would call an 'innovation' or 'creative commons'; the growth of active citizenship and reportage (see the rise of blogging and 'smart mob' street movements, nowhere more evident than in the Parisian demonstrations); and the emergence of co-operative organisational structures (see any number of activist, friendship or affinity networks).

These values, emerging from within this play-space, stand alongside critiques of modernity coming from environmentalism, feminism or spiritualism - and indeed, in their horizontal and connective principles, have a deep affinity with them. Our elemental capacity for play, and the structures of the Net, have conjoined with startling fruitfulness at the end of the twnetieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

Precarious life, flexicurity and care

I'd like to conclude by looking at the top-down political response to the prospect of a mainstream of player-citizens, player-consumers and player-producers. The political response has often been confused and contradictory.

Certainly the basic contradiction in most western societies - i.e. legislating for a full-on, capitalistic popular culture, with our visual environment strewn with mind-blowing and seductive advertising images in every corner, and then bemoaning the fact that 'dole bludgers' and 'sickie merchants' can't manifest enough commitment to their humdrum office tasks - is never addressed, or,

it seems, even understood. There has been some shift in the direction of acknowledging common parenting rights for men and women - in which the classic (and ludic) test moment is the flexibility to able to see a daughter or son's school team play a mid-week match. Yet this has not been anywhere near enough to really address growing anxieties about how children are developing in a two-parents-full-time-working society.

There could be a more thoughtful state response to the possibilities, as well as risks, of *precarité*. In France, millions of students and workers recently took to the streets to protest against the *precarité*, or precariousness, that new deregulations of the labour market held out for their lives. In Australia, laws pointing in a similar direction have also caused many heated column inches but, as far as I can tell, little storming of the barricades. The English equivalent to *precarité* is 'precariousness', but this doesn't quite capture it; a more unsettling, fearful insecurity is implied.

There is a prankster political movement in Italy that aims to create a new patron saint for the flexible, short-term, precarious worker, called Punto San Precario. San Precario can be seen in supermarkets in Milan, in full costume, laying a benediction upon the poor shelfstackers. This has given rise to a whole, semi-subterranean discussion about the condition of precarity in the modern workforce, and how this might well be an opportunity for a new collective movement.[1] Frenchi, part of the Milan activist group Chainworkers, defines precarity this way: 'the problem of precarity is when they call you at midnight in order to tell you "look, tomorrow you've gotta work" when you've already got plans to go to Lugano to visit your family'. Chainworkers are keen to distinguish their complaint from that of the old Fordist worker, looking for a secure existence tied to a respected craft or skill. There is an element of the short-term, freelance-worker's condition - that lack of commitment to any organisation - that they like and enjoy. Like so many in this mobile-phoned, cheap-flying, net-café-dwelling generation, mobility and new experience are largely what they crave, in a context of strong friendship connections.

Their challenge to just-in-time capitalism is this: if you only require my

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1. See www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001800.php. For a useful overview of these debates, see Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'From Precarity to Precariousness and Back Again: Labour, Life and Unstable Networks', *Fibreculture*, Issue 5 www.journal. fibreculture.org/issue5/neilson_rossiter.html

labour and skills for a limited period of time, and for a specific task only, then in return the state must provide me with 'social flexicurity' - that is, a social security that empowers the flexible worker to control her own time, to receive part-time rates in exact proportion to a full-time wage, to receive the same social benefits as a full-time worker. Frenchi's quip about precarity almost perfectly evokes the 'caring' end of my play-care duality, mentioned earlier. This is a player who wants the time and space to develop his human relationships, valued as an activity intrinsically good in itself. He is prepared to accept part-time work as the means to that balanced life, but resists the idea of employers putting his part-time productivity at their beck and call.

If this is part of the understanding of the French students' protest about new employment laws, then I would suggest that they are not as regressive or petit-bourgeois in their concerns as some of the commentary has suggested. I see the basic scene of the play moment being enacted here again: young people willing and eager to live exploratory, unpredictable, possible lives - the lives of players - but unwilling to do so without a solid ground of play. Without some collective assurance, that is, that this free play does not end up leaving them vulnerable to attack or exploitation.

I agree with Richard Sennett at the end of *The New Culture of Capitalism*, when he concedes that our technology-driven economies and societies have moved us irrevocably away from the old organisations of the past. The 'new men and woman' of information capitalism, shaped by their net culture and experience, simply won't buy the work ethic any more - their lives are too speedy, mutable and transformative for all that. But Sennett argues that one of the things the state can do is to help these new players build a narrative in their lives - some sense that their player's moves build up to some accumulation of talent, status or experience, rather than just a series of disconnected episodes. His answer to that, similar to the Chainworkers, is to promote the status of part-time work, and support it through various income supplements, targeted benefits and tax breaks. His second suggestion is that greater opportunities for social usefulness, for care and mentoring should be provided by the state, deploying the part-time and the underemployed.

Player-workers, in their mobility and fleet-footedness, may slip the bonds of social duty - but they may also miss that sense of responsibility and neededness also. A clever state should provide those opportunities - and not just as an

entreaty to free voluntary action, but one which might also provide some kind of financial or material incentive.

Again, that tandem is appearing: play and care, care and play; the desire to live an adapting life of possibility and openness - but also the expectation that this will take place upon a background of support and protection. No matter how this may look to someone standing in the newly industrialising towns of China or India, this structure of feeling is, I suggest, where many of us in the rich parts of the world are, in our hearts and minds. Not tied to a work ethic - but heading towards a play ethic. The issue of what we do with this cognitive and affective surfeit, in terms of our attitudes towards local and global progressive reform, is the most urgent political question.

This essay is adapted from a keynote lecture given by Pat Kane at The Brisbane Festival of Ideas, 2006.

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