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PLAYING WITH IT: ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON THE TECHNOLOGICAL PRACTICES OF YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract

Recently some Information Systems researchers have suggested that the younger generation engage with information technologies in a different way from the older generation. To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, we have been conducting ethnographic research on the technological practices of young professionals within an organizational context. Our initial findings suggest that young people become engrossed in information technology in their everyday practices. We describe this engrossment in everyday phenomena as play, using the interpretive concept of ‘play’ as developed by Erving Goffman and expanded by Clifford Geertz. Our study aims to contribute towards theorizing of the everyday practices of young people’s engagement with IT.

Keywords: Qualitative Research Methods, Ethnography, Play, Generations, Practices.
1 INTRODUCTION

Recently a debate has started in the Information Systems (IS) research literature regarding the rise of a new generation (e.g., Bennett and Maton, 2010; Selwyn, 2009; Smith et al., 2012; Vodanovich et al., 2010). In this debate, young tech-savvy people, sometimes labelled as digital natives, Generation-Y or similar, are deemed to be unlike preceding generations, usually labelled as digital immigrants, in their engagement with IT (see, Wang et al., 2013). Some of the proponents claim that, whereas the previous generations tended to resist new IT or at least had some difficulties with IT adoption, the younger generation of today has no such problems (contra cf. Venkatesh et al., 2003). For the latter, their engagement with IT is argued to be rather more intuitive and thus seem natural.

This debate has important implications for IS research: if a new younger generation is indeed entering the workforce with different perceptions of IT, then some of our theories concerning technology acceptance and adoption may need to change. For example, the technology acceptance model (TAM) and its most recent incarnation as a unified model is described as being useful for assessing the likelihood of success for new technology introductions and understanding the drivers of acceptance in “populations of users that may be less inclined to adopt and use new systems” (Venkatesh et al., 2003, p. 426). However, if the younger generation welcome new technologies and display no signs of resistance, then theories such as TAM may no longer be so relevant. New ways of conceptualizing the relationship between people and their engagement with IT may be required.

Hence the purpose of this paper is to contribute towards theorizing of the everyday practices of young people’s engagement with IT. While we recognize that there is no consensus on either what constitutes a generation (see, Alwin and McCammon, 2003; Corsten, 1999; Edmunds and Turner, 2005) or the relationship of technological skills to an actual generation (see, Jones et al., 2010; McMullin et al., 2007); we, accordingly, take the view that it might be useful to explore in more depth the actual practices of young people. Here, following generational scholarship, we critically acknowledge Mannheim (1952) who points toward interpreting the actual everyday practices of people, and their participation in them, which might explain the generational phenomena.

We have therefore been conducting an ethnographic research project concerning the technological practices of young professionals within an organizational context. The underlying goal of our ethnographic research is to uncover what young people actually do rather than what they say they do with IT. In this way, we begin to inquire about the nature of everyday practices rather than relying on the prevalent perception of young generations’ technological practices. Accordingly, we opted for ethnographic research insofar it focuses on the mundane side of everyday activities and thus has the potential to uncover some important insights about everyday practices (e.g., Harvey and Myers, 1995; Manning, 2008, 1996; Myers, 1997; Prasad, 1997), something that is difficult to discover using other research methods.

Our theoretical perspective is based on some of Erving Goffman’s work in sociology. Goffman (1961) says that when everyday practices are understood in terms of an interpretive dialectic of ‘play’ they provide rich insight into the structure of social interactions. Consistent with Goffman, we invoke the dialectic of play of everyday practices. We should clarify that when Goffman uses the concept of play, he uses it in two senses: first, within the context of a drama, and second, within the context of game. Hence we also focus on these two aspects: we focus on underlying dramaturgical structure of practices as a play and on the everyday practices of young people as play in a game. Goffman’s insight has already been employed and expanded by Geertz (1973, p. 412ff) to describe the deep absorption of people in their everyday practices as ‘deep play’. Our suggestion is that the interpretive concept of ‘play’ might be useful for grasping the everyday practices of the young generation who we found were absorbed in playing with IT (cf. McMullin et al., 2007, p. 298ff).

The structure of this paper is as follows. We begin with a discussion of our theoretical perspective based on the works of Goffman (1961) and Geertz (1973). Next, we define the concept of play. We, then, explain our main theoretical lens and how it can be used in practice to interpret the young generation’s
entwinement with technology, followed by some supporting preliminary evidence from the field. The final two sections are the discussion and conclusions.

2 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The works of Goffman (1961) have begun to influence IS research, most notably with his dramaturgical model of social interaction (e.g., Manning, 1996; Myers and Newman, 2007; Vaast, 2007) and his approach to ‘thick descriptive’ ethnographic research (Geertz, 1973). However, Goffman’s concept of ‘play’ remains novel to IS scholarship, although it is an important part of his theoretical perspective.

2.1 The Phenomenon of Play

Goffman (1961) describes the phenomenon of play within a game as follows:

“A game, defined as a body of rules associated with a lore regarding good strategies, and a play, defined as any particular instance of a given game being played from beginning to end. Playing could then be defined as the process of [engagement] through which a given play is initiated and eventually completed; action is involved, but only the strictly game-relevant aspects of action.” (p. 33)

The emphasis is put on the involvement insofar as “games can be fun to play,” Goffman (1961, p. 17) says and “fun alone is the approved reason for playing them.” However, he steps away from the common sense view of ‘play’ and invokes a critical perspective from which he sees “games as world-building activities” (p. 25). From this perspective, he conceptualizes everyday practices as play, occurring within events where roles and identities are enacted, to develop understanding of our involvement in the world.

Accordingly, Goffman (1961, p. 26) points out that our involvement in everyday interactions creates instances of play as “encounters,” which in essence, “generate a world of meanings that is exclusive to it.” As we find ourselves in play in everyday practices, we can only understand it from within the very practice in which we’re absorbed in, he points out, instead of taking an objective external view (Ibid.). Thus, he reminds us that it is not possible to reduce a practice to mere rules and resources as the dynamics of play. Further, by treating play as encounters that occur in our everyday practices, he develops a critical framework of practical interactions. From this perspective, the interpretive concept of encounters, thus, reveal the dialectic of play of everyday practice: a practice is seen as an ongoing dialog among players which requires actual volitional involvement in a dramaturgical situation (Ibid, p. 60). In this way, the everyday practices can be conceptualized as a play, a situation which, Goffman (1963, p. 18) goes on to say, can be interpreted as “full spatial environment,” or a playing field, which allows the people to interact meaningfully in the world.

Here, we acknowledge the complexity of Goffman’s framework of play, including spatiality of practices, which stemmed from his dramaturgical interpretations of everyday practices (Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1963; cf. Myers and Newman, 2007). Given that Goffman’s framework is rather detailed, we limit our discussion in this paper to only the basic structure of play namely, encounters.

2.2 Play as Encounters

As just mentioned, play hinges on the encounters which occur within an event. For Goffman (1961), our everyday practices in the world are thus the initial point of inquiry; accordingly, he begins to build the framework of play using our mundane encounters in everyday situations:

“The varieties of interaction that occur among persons who are face to face for the avowed purpose of carrying on a game, I shall call gaming, including here, in addition to playing, activity that is not strictly relevant to the outcome of the play and cannot be defined in terms of the game. I shall call a focused gathering that ostensibly features plays of a game a gaming encounter. A play of a game has players; a gaming encounter has participants. A play is a special abstraction
from the more concrete unit, gaming encounter, just as the concept of player is an abstraction from that of participant.” (p. 33)

Here, Goffman points out that a focused gathering is essential for an encounter. He further says insofar as the participants are involved in the play, their actual spatiotemporal co-presence doesn’t matter; for instance, he shows how an actual involvement in a playful practice like chess can be remote. Hence, a play forges its own world where participants are involved within events through a series of encounters (Ibid, p. 24). This conceptualization is employed by Geertz (1973) in his seminal expansion of the concept of play using his ethnographic interpretation of encounters. He describes it succinctly as follows:

“A set of persons engrossed in a common flow of activity and relating to one another in terms of that flow. Such gatherings meet and disperse; the participants in them fluctuate; the activity that focuses them is discreet—a particulate process that reoccurs rather than a continuous one that endures. They take their form from the situation that evokes them, the [space in] which they are placed… it is a form, and an articulate one, nonetheless.” (p. 424)

We further note that Geertz’s ethnographic evidence reveals that everyday practices indeed take a form of gatherings, or to use Goffman’s term ‘encounters’ in which people are deeply involved in a play situation (cf. Goffman, 1963, p. 38, 195-9). Hence, this deep engrossment in everyday phenomena is seen as a ‘deep play’ of participants in terms of practical encounters in the field (Geertz, 1973, p. 432ff). Next, the engrossment in practice as deep play is briefly explained.

2.3 Engrossment in Play

As we have just discussed, mundane activities when seen through the lens of play reveal a world where the participants are deeply absorbed. More specifically, Goffman (1961, p. 36) points out that the concept of play “provide[s] us with fine examples of how a mutual activity can utterly engross its participant, transforming them into worthy antagonists in spite of the triviality of the game” (emphasis added). Such absorption in the world of play is interpreted and expanded by Geertz (1973, p. 426 - 432), he provides the evidence for this immersion that weaves a web in which the participants are ‘exquisitely absorbed’. He develops an ethnographic definition of this deep engrossment as ‘deep play’ where the participants are seen as entwined with the play:

“Having come together in search of pleasure they have entered into a relationship which will bring the participants, considered collectively, net pain rather than net pleasure” (p. 433)

He notes the engrossment in play is aesthetically experiential (e.g., pain, pleasure) and relationship symbolic of actual involvement in practice; further, he interprets actual experiences as practical aesthetics rather than emotions. This interpretation deepens as he goes on to demonstrate using the ethnographic evidences to reveal that the engrossment itself is beyond any material value and pivots on everyday practices. Thus, he concludes that the participants’ very immersion in practices constitutes the play as a holistic whole:

“Their involvement with [play] bind[s] them into a set of rules which at once contains them and allows them play” (Ibid, p. 450)

In this way, the interpretive rules of play become an interplay between social (people as players) and material (devices and objects as equipment) in a historical event (in a given space and at specific time). Accordingly, Goffman (1961, p. 26) points out that in play the actual “use is usually made of traditional equipment having a social history of its own.” Thus, we can say a play is played on the backdrop of a historical space. To paraphrase Geertz (1973, p. 433), using the concept of play, we suggest that IT can be seen as a holistic whole (equipment with a certain configuration), a plaything, with which individuals are in deep play in their everyday practices (cf. Dreyfus, 1991, p. 62ff).
3  INTERPRETING ENGROSSMENT IN IT AS DEEP PLAY

We begin our discussion of engrossment in IT as deep play by first of all acknowledging earlier IS research concerning everyday technological practices. For instance, Dourish (2004, p. 99ff) explains our engrossment in IT as a transparent practice in which we use equipment unreflectively and become only aware of it if our absorption with equipment is broken. He points out that our absorption in an activity is interrupted when one steps outside of the ongoing activity by reflecting on the situation or the interruption is caused by the IT failure with which one is deeply engrossed in. Similarly, Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011) show that we are first absorbed, or ‘engrossed’, in practice, such as interacting with IT, before we are able to reflect on the situation. Consistent with the idea of play, they endorse the view that only a breakdown in our everyday practice brings our attention to the phenomena in and with which we are involved; otherwise it remains hidden and taken for granted (cf. Winograd and Flores, 1986, p. 163ff).

Accordingly, in deep play, the rules and understandings of the play remain in the background while one is deeply engrossed, otherwise the play will be spoiled. This point is also raised and made explicit by Dourish (2004) in terms of understanding smooth interaction with IT in everyday work. From this perspective, we can, therefore, say, that the smoothness of practice relies on unreflective action as Goffman (1961) precisely explains using the logic of a play:

“An effortless unawareness will be involved, and if this is not possible then an active turning-away or suppression will occur.” (p. 24)

This aspect is further elaborated by Geertz (1973, p. 443), he demonstrates that when participants are engrossed in practice the play “puts a construction on them,” as their practical interaction with play equipment becomes unreflective. Goffman (1961) further explains:

“It is not only possible for participants to become involved in the [play], but it is also defined as obligatory that they sustain this involvement in given measure” (p. 36)

Accordingly, in order to skilfully and purposefully interact with IT in our everyday practices the associated technological skills and everyday understanding must be taken for granted and remain in the background (Dreyfus, 2012); in other words, the involvement in play needs to be transparent in practice in order for the deep play to occur. Mainemelis (2001, p. 555) says such transparent practices are “personal rites of passage,” within organizational practices, which he argues, enable engrossment and usually emerge out of mundane activities. He goes on to say that it is one’s actual involvement in deep play that determines a practice as a rite of passage for oneself. Hence, following Goffman (1961) and Geertz (1973), we suggest the concept of play might be helpful for understanding the technological practices of the younger generation.

4  RESEARCH METHOD

We are using critical ethnographic research in an attempt to uncover what is going on in practice (Myers, 1997). The site of the study is a large scale organization, a provider of technology services, from here on known as PlayOrg (a pseudonym), in New Zealand. Contrary to the pseudonym, which is to chosen to emphasise the concept of play, the organization itself is not involved in any game development. Our key selection criteria of organization was simply a higher presence of young professionals; this is reflected in PlayOrg’s active graduate program and the software development department being driven by young professionals. Most of our participants were in their first two years of employment.

4.1  Data Collection

The initial contact with PlayOrg was made in July 2013. One of the researchers joined soon afterward as a part-time software engineer on an active project. Hence he worked for the organization for a few days a week and for the other days focuses on his research activities. One advantage of being an employee is that full access to PlayOrg’s was given, including human and IT resources, and thus, the
doors were opened for seamless integration in the team. Klein and Myers (1999) say that in interpretive field studies there is an interplay between participants and researchers, and this is certainly the case in our project.

In line with the ethnographic approach, the primary source of data collection is participant observation. Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011, p. 350) say that a researcher using participant observation becomes “a temporary participant” instead of mere observer. In this way, following Geertz (1973, p. 3ff), our field notes included “thick descriptions” of meetings (weekly project meetings, user groups, expert groups), formal communications (email, updates), informal communications (instant messaging, email), audio visual resources (photographs, audio notes), digital resources (project knowledge base, project IT resources) and informal chats. In addition to participant observation, we have also begun to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with participants. We are in the mid to late stages of ethnography and thus far we have collected 420 hours of ethnographic evidence.

Using the concept of play, we are aiming to understand the question: how do young people relate to IT in their everyday practices? The question addresses, therefore, both epistemic (i.e. concerning the skills) and ontological (i.e., concerning the ways of interactions) aspects of practices. Thus, following Goffman (1961), our unit of analysis is ‘practices’ of young professionals in relation to their interaction with IT. Accordingly, we began ethnographic analysis (Myers, 1997) while ‘in the field’ adhering to the interpretive guidelines of Klein and Myers (1999). We are further invoking ‘constant comparison’ following Schultze (2000) to interpret ethnographic data in the light of interpretive concepts.

The preliminary analysis of our field data is presented next.

5 PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD

Given the ongoing nature of the ethnography and the huge amount of data we have collected already, we limit our discussion to only one aspect of play, namely, the structure of engrossment in play.

5.1 The Interplay

We shall begin by recalling an event from the field which opens up a fruitful path to develop our understanding concerning the logic of play in practice. The event reveals how young professionals are entwined with their practices. As noted earlier, the organization in question is not a developer of games, although as it turns out the excerpt mentioned here concerns a personal project. Consider the following excerpt from our field notes:

“John is working on a [personal project] game design; it appears to be a map of a multi-player game... [A project manager] comes in looking for him and comments: “well, he is just playing,” and gave me a quick update instead, but neither showed any interest nor really minded what he was doing – it seems to be a persona projected on him. From my own IT experience, it seems this: since he has completed the work he was supposed to do, it is playtime. [Another project manager] came in a couple of times and asked him about [project tasks], but he, too, is unbothered by the fact that John is [playing]. John updates [project manager] with progress, who then leaves satisfactorily. Now, he is, again, absorbed in this interplay of work and play, ignoring most chitchats from [other teammates] and simply replies with a mutter, “Hmmm,” biting nails occasionally and constantly shaking feet; he is restless and anxious. An interesting aspect is that he was visibly disconcerted, every time his absorption was broken, just as if someone is interrupting a serious task.” (Excerpt from the field notes)

As mentioned earlier in our theoretical discussion, we notice some low hanging fruits here. First, as Goffman (1961) suggests, there is a seriousness to play which is seen in practice as we find the visible disconcertedness of the participant. This, as Goffman argues, is simply due to one’s immersion in practice. Second, while the participant is engrossed in play, he successfully switches between activities. As we noted earlier, the switching exacts a toll which disturbs their engrossment in play. Finally, we
also observe some generational aspects as the older project manager, by assuming ‘just playing’, interpreted work strictly in terms of work whereas for the young professional, the work practices are entwined with play as interplay of practices. On the other hand, the second project manager seems to be leaning toward the practices of young generation by interpreting it as something mundane.

Along the same lines, one participant explicitly describes their interaction with IT in terms of playing with new technologies. Consider the following quote from an interview:

“It’s just something new that I want to know what it does and I want to play with it, you know, like some people like playing games, I do the same way. For me, [IT] is not too much different from a game, you know, something that I want to play with and as soon as I get used to it, I know how things work, and then I get bored.” (Excerpt from an interview)

Here, the participant, a software developer, helps us to see how technological practices can be seen as play. We also see evidence concerning practical aesthetics, specifically engrossment in play and banality of play. When this person wants to learn new technologies, say some new software or use a new app, they see this as ‘play’ in which they become engrossed with the plaything. But playing with IT also becomes boring, or not “deep,” when there is nothing at stake (Geertz, 1973, p. 431ff) and nothing more to learn. This leads to our next evidence in which we unpack the evidence regarding the logic of play.

5.2 The Logic of Play

During our field research we began to observe a common thread in the practices of participants. This thread weaves a pattern of play with repeated references, both implicit and explicit, where the participants relate their interaction with IT as ‘playing’ a game. One interviewee discusses the logic of PlayOrg’s project work:

“Once you have solved one problem there are always other problems coming up, and then for each problem, well, it is kind of a game. Honestly, it’s kind of like a game. When you are doing programming, it is kind of like a game. When you play a game, you want to pass a level and go to next, same is in programming when something is new I want to solve that problem and pass it [the level]….but I really have to the pass, so when you solve the problem you make it doable….because there are so many [ways]...how to solve the problem, that’s interesting but…when you have solved a problem and if second time you come across it again, it’s not so interesting anymore.” (Excerpt from an interview)

In this account of a young programmer’s practices, we find subtle hints toward deep play. First, echoing Goffman (1961), the participants see the encounter with IT as a game in which one needs to be purposefully engage to extract the meaning out of play. For instance, the participant relates acquiring new skills to progressing through the play by ‘passing a level’ of expertise. Further, to repeat the same thing is found to be akin to repeating a move which forges a banal play in which there is no depth (Geertz, 1973, p. 434).

In the same way, another young participant revealed how he saw his technological work with IT as being a play like Lego:

“I think it [i.e. the playing aspect] just always seems to have been there. One of the big things for me about [IT] is that it’s like Lego and…you’ve got all the pieces always with you and you can just make stuff there. And then you’ve always got information that you need to do stuff with it.” (Excerpt from an interview)

From this insight we note a few things. First, we see that the concept of playing with IT ‘always seems to have been there’ as the participant discloses the ubiquitous aspect of technology in everyday practices. Second, the ‘play’ is entwined with work practices and inseparable from them. Third, although this was not mentioned explicitly in the interview, we found it interesting that some of the participants actually had pieces of Lego in their work spaces (see Figure 1). From this perspective, it seems to us that the
concept of play (with IT) is rooted deeply in the everyday practices of the younger generation, or at least in the young people that we observed in our fieldwork.

Goffman (1961, p. 24) says “games can provide a beginning” in order to understand everyday practices. Our preliminary ethnographic evidence from the field endorses Goffman’s suggestion as we find an abundance of ‘play’ in young participants’ technological practices. Like Geertz (1973) we find that the concept of play is quite complex in practice and the deeper the interaction, the more intricate the practices become. As a result, we note the younger generation is found to be deeply in a dialectical play with technology in their everyday practices. Further, a deep play is also found to be unreflective in the field and, thus, elusive to grasp in practice. This interpretation also brings us in line with the dialectic of play in practices, arguing thus: in a playful absorption in everyday practices, the player and the play become one as a holistic whole, comprising of playing field such as organizational spaces and the plaything such as technology, insofar as the practices become transparent and the interaction of players fluid (Goffman, 1961, p. 24; cf. Dourish, 2004; Dreyfus, 1991, 2012; also, Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011).

Our initial findings thus further endorse the idea that the interpretive concept of play might be useful for understanding the technological practices of the younger generation. A question remains as to whether this perspective might shed light on the practices of the older generation. Although we have not exclusively studied the older generation ourselves, we note that ‘digital immigrants’ are usually described as ‘users’ of IT. From the perspective of Goffman’s theory, we can say such users of IT are not normally seen as being engrossed in a play in their interaction with technology. In other words, whereas the younger generation is found to be playfully intuitive in their technological practices, the older generation tend not to be described in such terms (e.g., Venkatesh et al., 2003); hence, an impression prevails of a generational divide of IT usage.

Our ethnographic inquiry into the everyday practices of the younger generations thus yields two contributions to the IS discipline. First, from the play perspective, we begin to add some theoretical tools in the toolkit for ethnographic researchers. Second, in the practitioners’ perspective, the interpretive
concept of play is argued to be essential to develop and manage a young workforce which is shown to be immersed in IT in their everyday practices.

We thus begin to understand that the dialectic of play might be important for organizations insofar as enculturation of play within an organization might be useful for young professionals. The latter might require overseeing rather than strict management. For instance, many IT organizations encourage and foster pet projects; in other words, encourage people to ‘play’ with technology. Such projects sometimes becomes an important resource for the organizations, thus creating a dilemma: a play might be overseen but cannot be fully managed (Goffman, 1961). An important organization tool, on the other hand, often requires strategic management. We can, then, say that play might be important for an organization but once a play like dialectic is attained, it is important to acknowledge the differences in practices insofar as what seems to be a plaything in the beginning later on might become an important organizational tool. Thus, re-stating Huizinga (1980, p. 200), organizations are encouraged to instil the dialectic of play in everyday practices which are also shown to be closely entwined with acquisition of skills and creativity in organizing and technological practices (e.g., Kark, 2011; cf. Vaast, 2007).

7 CONCLUSION

We have looked at one aspect of the everyday technological practices of young professionals. By applying the concept of play to the technological practices of the younger generation, we observe that ubiquitous technology makes “a world available whenever the individual decides to dip into it” (Goffman, 1961, p. 37ff). Hence, the evidence suggests that there is nothing fundamentally innate about technology in young people’s practices; instead, IT creates a world which is ubiquitously available and in which immersion is crucial if one is to interact with it meaningfully: the question concerning being tech-savvy is, then, to be in deep play with technology which requires one to be engrossed in IT in one’s everyday practices (Geertz, 1973, p. 440-2).

We will continue to study the practices of the younger generation and hope to uncover more details about the intricacies and richness of their interaction with information technologies. We hope we have opened up a new direction of practice research of IT usage. One possible avenue for future research is to see if the interpretive concept of play can be applied to the different kinds of young people e.g., those who are not practically involved in information systems, or young people in different countries and from different cultures.

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