

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF IS MOSTLY KNOWN FOR HIS BOOKS ON CYBERSPACE AND THE MEDIA. HE, BETTER THAN MOST, KNOWS ABOUT INTERACTION AND INTERCONNECTIVITY. HE WRITES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES, TIME AND OTHER “HOT” PUBLICATIONS ON THAT SUBJECT. ALL THE MORE REASON TO INTERVIEW HIM ON THE SUBJECT OF PLAYING AS A WAY TO LEARN, AND THE ROLE INTERACTIVE COMPUTER GAMES PLAY IN THE LIVES OF UPGRADING CHILDREN.

Douglas Rushkoff: 'Play is the key to renewing from inside'

DOOR ARNE GILLERT EN OLGA KOPPENHAGEN

What do playing and doing business have in common?

Business people should be more open to the idea of meaningful, playful, and ongoing innovation. But most business-people have surrendered innovation to marketing. They see their product as either inferior to or the same as everybody else's. The only place they think they can create any differential is through their branding, through the mythology surrounding their product rather than through the product itself.

If business people had more faith in their own capacities, took responsibility for their own actions, and followed their true passion for the actual thing they were doing, then this actual thing – the product or service – would get better. In this age of transparency, they will end up attracting employees and consumer-enthusiasts who are part of the culture of the product, the culture of the service.

It is post-Marxian in the way it re-connects people to their work. If people get reconnected with the joy of their labour, then the value that they are getting and creating transcends the money they are earning. In the States when we talk about salaries we use the word 'compensation.' I think 'compensation' is

a terrible word, because what does it mean, it means you hate your work, you are being compensated with money for the pain of work rather than rewarded for the job well done.

The way to build the kind of culture we see at Apple, say, is to reward employees with more autonomy and agency, rather than just with more money. So, rather than rewarding employees with something that is unrelated to the work (money) when they do well, you give them more authority over the work. Some of the companies that I have worked with have created think tanks – groups of people given the time and space to develop new ideas. When employees do something great, they are rewarded with a certain amount of time to spend in the think tank, which is a real honour.

Another means of rewarding is to let people do, for example one day a week, whatever they want. Give them time to explore new ideas or to broaden their knowledge, or whatever they think will contribute. In this way, you stimulate innovative thinking enormously, and in the right way.

What you say is that you need to give autonomy to people in order for them to innovate. But where does play come in?

The answer lies in the understanding of deep playing, and higher forms of play. In western society, most play is reduced

to agonistic play, play between teams, with a winner and a loser. So then the reason that you play is to win and end the game. Deep play, on the other hand, is not about winning, but about prolonging the game. The game itself is the fun. How do we keep this game going? And that's a model for innovation at work. How do you keep it going? The way you keep it going is to be constantly finding and exploring the challenges before you. If you want to keep answering new questions then you need questions that open up other questions. If an answer to a question ends the inquiry, it's a bad question, and a bad answer. This is what could be called an 'infinite game.'

Then, what is the essence of play, what does it capture more than freedom, flow or ...?

Any form of play is a ritual in which you create a sacred space. The consequences of errors do not necessarily have real world repercussions. In this sacred circle you have permission to play and to make mistakes. The play space for innovation doesn't happen so very close to the market, where metrics like sales will count for a lot. For me, playfulness also means you have the permission to geek out, to be a true, true nerd, to love it, whatever it is. If the work of your company is to scrape the shit off boots, then you should be a geek in that, be great in it, because to you, that's your play, your art.

A great company creates a sacred place, a save haven, where people can get into the thing they are doing, whether it is the making of nutritional supplements or coming up with math formulas. The geek should be celebrated. But nowadays, they found ways to get the geeks to care more about money than about what they were doing. This is considered 'motivation' by management theorists, but it is anathema to creativity or innovation.

What I have often seen is that flow, playfulness, taking responsibility works in small teams. But as soon as you have big companies, all of that vanishes. How do you explain that?

It has a lot to do with scale. Human beings are local, social creatures. The return to localism is a big thing in America

now. People have come to realize that the big city isn't everything. It is just too big. Like national recognition and branding – it becomes almost generic. It starts to feel too anonymous. In companies it's the same thing. People create their own, more scaled networks to feel safe. And as a safe place is inviting people to develop, companies should stimulate those smaller networks rather than always trying to mainstream them into the greater corporate culture.

If we get back to playing again: you have to give people some rules to be able to play...

Without rules there is no play! As long as we understand that rules are not coercive conditions, but social agreements which we can change as we go along. We should honour the rules, and if we don't agree, we can say: 'Okay, let's change them.' It's the core principle of open source.

That's the difference between coercion and play: laws are coercive: you have to do this, you are not allowed to do that. And if you do not obey, we'll put you in prison.

Companies who want to create a culture of playful innovation, have to understand that deep play is not extrinsic to the work at hand. You cannot just hire a company to do it for you, to throw parties, or to do role-playing scripts with the managers once a week. Deep play is not childish antics, as some companies like to think when they put a table-tennis table in the canteen. Deep play is serious business! Like Hillary Clinton said when her campaign was getting tougher: 'Now we're getting to the fun part'. People were horrified by that, but she meant it: for her that's the fun, the challenge! Companies need to start to see themselves as miniature civilizations whose ethos expresses itself in the culture that the company is ready to create for the world. That culture only comes into being from the inside. Only a truly playful company is able to invite others to the party and make sure that the guests are not leaving early.

Can those playful innovative companies compete with the big, international, mighty corporations?

I do believe that the invention of the corporation in the renaissance, with its false ideals of specialization (it actually despecialized people and created unskilled labor), has set in

About Douglas Rushkoff

Winner of the first Neil Postman award for Career Achievement in Public Intellectual Activity, Douglas Rushkoff is an author, teacher, and documentarian who focuses on the ways people, cultures, and institutions create, share, and influence each other's values. He sees 'media' as the landscape where this interaction takes place, and 'literacy' as the ability to participate consciously in it.

His ten best-selling books on new media and popular culture have been translated to over thirty languages. They include *Cyberia*, *Media Virus*, *Playing the Future*,



Nothing Sacred: The Truth about Judaism, and Coercion.

He has just finished a book applying renaissance principles to today's complex economic landscape, *Get Back in the Box: Innovation from the Inside Out.*

Rushkoff graduated magna cum laude from Princeton University, received an MFA in Directing from California Institute of the Arts and a post-graduate fellowship (MFA) from The American Film Institute. He has worked as a certified stage fight choreographer, an SAT tutor, and as keyboardist for the industrial band *PsychicTV.*

motion a series of dehumanizing events that did mark a significant change. But these corporations are now crumbling under their own weight. Industrialization really changed the relationship between the people and the work they do. It created the specialization, the division of labour, separation from labourers and capitalists. Public relations then generated myths around these dehumanized companies, in an effort to recreate the human relationships that existed between craftsmen and consumers in local settings. Today, corporations are seen as the invincible and all-powerful movers of society. But they're not.

Interactive technology has fostered an ethos of play again after four centuries of repression and top-down control. Thanks to the internet, we have a lot more visibility and transparency, more ability to see what is going on, many more perspectives on the world. So we could, perhaps, arrest the inappropriate 'bigger is better' hierarchical model and look towards more peer-based, playful, self-aware clusters of people for whom work has intrinsic value. Companies can get better by actually getting better at what they do – not merely buy purchasing some other company.

What is your play about?

Figuring things out, that's fun! My play is going to big meetings, with 500 or 1000 established executives and then cracking their heads open. Getting them to actually think the way they did when they were nineteen years old and first getting into what they were doing. And the beauty of it is that now they can bring wealth of their forty year experience in the industry back into the naïve wonder they had when they first got into it. Then you get super-qualified persons. Wise, adult, playful, adventurous people. Restoring that wonder, I love doing that. And the tougher the audience, the more angry and demotivated and disconnected the audience is, the more thrill there is in seeing that light get turned on again. You just can't beat an experienced person who is also a player – who sees that there's more to lose by staying the same than by changing and growing and learning.

So playing for you is about breaking the rules?

Breaking the rules is not the same as breaking the laws! You are allowed to break the rules in order to discover things. Companies like Jet Blue broke a lot of rules by going place to place instead of using the old hub-and-spoke model in the

airline industry. That freaked everybody out. But that is also when everybody notices that you are breaking a pattern. We see the world through patterns. Master players know how and when to break patterns and create new ones. They have to be both inside and outside the game to do that, though. And really really playing.

Companies that fire their most successful, playful people, I think that's so stupid. Clorox company had a fantastic product called Combat. It was a revolutionary, non-toxic roach killer that led to decreasing roach populations in the United States. Instead of sending Combat's scientists off to tackle another problem, they sold the whole company to Unilever. You don't take a successful group of scientists who solved a problem and sell them! You should keep them, because what will they be coming up with next? Put them on a new project, keep the team together. They are your best players.

You wrote that the most successful teams are the teams that come together voluntarily. Does that have anything to do with the fact that you cannot play against your will?

Indeed, playing has to be voluntary. But, I think it is possible to force yourself to play and still have good results. For instance, I know I have to fly to Germany tomorrow. Tonight I want to put my three-year-old daughter to bed, and I know I'll have to do some writing for three or four hours. And it has to be good. I will have to play. Who feels like writing in such a situation? Not me! But I'll manage. I will have to make myself play. I'll remember why I do this, what I want to communicate, and find the zone. That's hard. In a competitive landscape, when you're losing money and the shareholders are pulling the plug and want to fire you, it's hard for any executive to say: 'Okay, now we're gonna play again.' But that is when you need it the most. It's the people who are able to maintain that playful mentality to the end, they are the ones to win. And often they are not even looking to win!

This magazine is read by HRD people. Suppose they buy your stuff about playfulness, and want to create an environment with room to play: then they still are left with the question: what role can I play? To change the hiring practice. The key word is passion! You need people with expertise, but even more important: you

need people who care about whatever the company is doing. Who are willing to dedicate their lives to the business. Google gives its prospective employees some tests: science, math tests, geek tests. Not only to check if they are good at certain things, but also to see if they want to do the test!

Most companies use a hierarchical model to organize themselves. Once you take play and competence into consideration, you end up with a more circular organizational chart – with the best players closest to the center. In an inspired company, that's where people want to get: to the center, with the most enthusiastic and competent players. The best people in their industries.

And the circular organizational chart doesn't just include employees. It includes customers, just outside the circle, who want to get inside. And employees of other companies, who know the very best people – the ones who they really want to meet and work with – are deep inside the circle of your company. And the closer people are to the middle, the more autonomy they get. The more choices they make. They are the people leading the industry and the culture. This isn't just play we're talking about, but the deepest form of competency and expertise.

These are also the people who best understand the core need that the company is addressing. It's easy to decide what to do next, and how to innovate, when you are really in touch with the human need you are answering.

Would you be so optimistic to say that people who follow their passion are doing the right thing? That they cannot play the wrong game?

Ultimately, yes. The guys who are running the oil companies, they don't like to destroy the world, but they have an obligation to their shareholders. Look at the trouble the CEO of BP got in, when he started to talk about getting 'beyond petroleum'. Shareholders were mad, and the stock went down. But the employees loved the idea of getting beyond petroleum. They were enlisted, heart and soul. And now the CEO is having a real conversation with environmentalists on what to do. So yes, if you open the possibility of people actually being good, you cannot play the wrong game.