

It's in The Mix

The Magic and Rationality of Combinations

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Picture this: The burglar is squatting next to the safe. He turns the handle of the lock in order to enter the right code. Will he crack it? Find the right combination of numbers? The handle is turned to the left, a bit to the right... Click! The door opens. The right combination at the right time can give an *open sesame-effect*. This characterizes the practices of the safe burglar. It also characterizes everyday life for citizens in a technology dominated society, where IT-systems demands the delivery of codes on a daily basis. Codes are used for verification, for identification and to grant access. The right combination make doors swing open, while the wrong combination denies without mercy. It stands between: "Welcome dear customer/client" and "you have now made three bad attempts and the account has been frozen".

While combinations are used for verification, they also have a broader role. In this paper I will discuss the cultural power that is to be found in conceptions and practices concerning the potential magic of the right mix or combination. Quests for open sesame-effects and the potential magic of the mix occur in several contexts. I would therefore like to present some examples of combination and mixing practices from two fields that are today symptomatically being mixed: namely popular culture and the world of business management. The examples show that a tension may occur between dreams about magical open sesame-effects and a striving for quite foreseeable and rationalized combination practices.

First some words about the mixing of the business world and popular culture. According to Nigel Thrift during the last years: "...business is being seen and is seeing itself differently. As a knowledge business, it becomes a major site of cultural intensity with faster turnover times nearer to those of 'creative' industries like, say, popular music or film, which have become some of its chief exemplars."(2002:210). Business is becoming similar to popular culture, which is characterized by youthfulness and playfulness, quickly shifting trends and styles, preoccupations with being hot or cool, and a prevailing urge to find the right mix of different elements in order to create novelty and to become successful.

Dreams are nourished by the hope for combinations that may give open sesame-effects and make doors swing open. In the world of popular culture the way the top producers of the music industry mix and work their magic is a sought-after knowledge (cf. Owsinsky, 1999) and in several parts of the business world magic and spiritualism is the rule of the day (cf. Mickelthwait & Wooldridge, 1996; Salamon, 2002).

Technological Magic and À la Carte Creation

A way to proceed into the discussion about the role of mixing of/within popular culture and business management can be by looking a little closer at the use of *digital media*. The chief example of digital media is the computer. I would like to make the not very controversial assumption that both popular culture and business management are practices in which digital media are being used increasingly. By taking digital mixing processes as the point of departure, it may then be possible to approach the question about what is actually being combined in different contexts. Another question would be if digital concepts can be adopted in a wider societal context?

Most digital media are based on quite complex technological systems. The complexity can sometimes make the media be conceived as enigmatic and almost magic. It is often referred to science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke who once wrote that : “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”. But when is a technology experienced as magic? The occasional oddities of the personal computer can be inexplicable. Sometimes strange error messages appear as mystical scriblings from an unknown place, and the automatic and invisible processes which is taking place ”under the hood” of the black boxed technology, can be mysterious (cf. Latour, 1993; Willim, 2002). The history of digital media is also filled with references to mystical and hermetical practices (Davis, 1998; Dery, 1996). Digital media can be considered as characterized by mystical properties and can be understood as a quite ephemeral technology (Willim, 1999).

The media scholar Lev Manovich (2001) has pointed out the basic features and some essential principles of what he calls, “new media”; I prefer the term digital media. He primarily discusses how the media are related to artistic creation. He writes about the variability and ephemerality of digital objects. But he also claim that digital media reward a certain kind of rationalized simplicity. Creation by using digital media is often characterized by the action of choosing from different databases and menus. These practices are centered around the combining and mixing of different digital objects. Manovich argues that digital media perfectly

matches the main logic of an industrialized society, which he says consists of the practices of "...choosing values from a number of predefined menus" (2001:128).

These digital media supported practices, tinted by the characteristics of an industrialized society, I would like to call *à la carte creation*. The smorgasbord or the menu of an *a la carte* restaurant might be a central metaphor for the industrialized consumer societies of the Western world, which are larded with various assortments and selections available for both consumption and production. It is everyday practice for most people to mix styles, images, signs, garments and articles into a multitude of combinations. These practices may be augmented with digital media, when devices like the computer enables swift, on the fly, cut and paste practices of different digital objects. Digital media can be considered as mysterious, as holders of magical properties, but the spread of the media might as well primarily reinforce simplistic creation processes characterized by making choices from different menus.

Modular Combinations, or "It's just like LEGO!"

Digital *à la carte* creation take place according to certain concepts. There are methods and prerequisites that characterize the way digital objects can be combined. Digital media, according to Manovich, are characterized by modularity, which means that objects within the framework of the media consist of (more or less) independent parts. These parts are discrete, that is, separate, units. The parts of digital objects consist in turn of smaller discrete parts, and so on, all the way down to bits (binary digits), the basic building blocks of digital media, or Manovich's new media (Manovich, 2001:31).

The modularity recur in other contexts, which are not necessarily hi tech. A typically modular artifact is the toy LEGO, consisting of standardized plastic bricks. LEGO is a concept that harmonizes in large measure with the modularity of computers. LEGO blocks are discrete modules that can be clicked together to make larger objects. LEGO is thus an excellent conceptual tool for thinking with, especially during the development of computer software. During the hot years of the new economy, I did a study (Willim, 2002) of the Swedish internet-consultancy Framfab (an abbreviation for the Swedish "Future Factory"). The company produced a piece of software called Brikks, for which they used LEGO as a physical conceptual tool to think with. This is one example of a convergence of LEGO and computer practices.

The link between LEGO and computers was also made explicit in the novel *Microserfs* (1995) by the American author Douglas Coupland. The book is a fictional account of a bunch of young people on the west coast of the USA who first work together at Microsoft's office in

Seattle, and who then start a company of their own farther south, in California. LEGO plays a central part in the book. The plastic toy is crucial for the development of a program called *Oop!*, a kind of software LEGO. The name that Coupland had used for the software LEGO product in the book was not chosen at random or because it sounds funny. In programming contexts the abbreviation OOP stands for Object-Oriented Programming. The object orientation in this type of programming is based on a modular concept and is thus linked to the modularity of computers. OOP is a central feature of much of program development. LEGO-like combinations are however not just occurring in relation to OOP, but are also characterizing several other types of software, especially some of the digital tools that are being used in popular culture. For example, when it comes to making music with the aid of digital media, modularity is a central concept.

LEGO-music

The computer has today become an essential music machine. It is being used for creating, recording, manipulating and mixing audio. Much of the music software available has a colorful user interface which makes it possible to combine different sounds represented by colored squares. Conceptually, it often looks a lot like LEGO. The association to LEGO and to the modular architecture of music software recur in several contexts (Davis, 2002; Sykes, 2001). Professional software like Emagic's Logic Audio and Steinberg's Cubase are characterized by a workflow consisting of the handling of colored bricks. Also music software aimed at children often use LEGO-like metaphors. In the beginning of 2003 the Swedish software developer "Teknikhuset" launched their computer-based game and music studio called "Nicke & Nilla Showtime!" targeted to children from age 4-5 years. The game is about choosing different clothes, moves for a dance show and sounds for the "hits" that the gameplayer may mix for the characters "Nicke" and "Nilla" (abbreviations for the Swedish artists Nicklas and Pernilla Wahlgren.).

To make music with computers is a process centered around making the right choices. It's crucial to have the ability to see/hear how different digital objects fit and can be combined into a tasteful final mix. These practices of combination are dominating today's professional music software, and they are being introduced to children using digital media through programs like "Nicke & Nilla Showtime!". In menus and folders, digital objects or different functions (like eg. equalisation or different effect parameters) can be chosen like dishes on a menu in a restaurant. Hopefully the choices makes a tasteful whole.

Recycling

The widespread employment of á la carte creation and modular combinations makes the question about copyright interesting. A mix is a completed work protected by copyright law. But what is really *the work* in this context? I have done interviews with disc jockeys and producers of electronic music in Sweden and Denmark. Many of these musicians did not care so much about copyright and the presumed inherent copyright protected value in the work of art. Instead they pointed out how the value of the work became legible when they were sharing their works with others. Some of the musicians were sharing their music with each other by sending digital files between their computers. The files weren't always songs, but could be separate sounds, loops and samples... the building blocks of what is normally considered a musical work of art. The building blocks could then be composed into new creations, into new works of art that could be called reworks or remixes. These practices of exchange and composition of musical digital elements has turned the creation of new mixes into something quite unpredictable.

What is at work here is digital recycling. To create something new by combining prefabricated elements is an essential idea within various types of artistic creations. In music the combination is called a mix. The value of the mix is dependent on the elements of the mix, the way in which they are combined, and also in which context the mix is presented. The context is something that the music business and their copyright advocates have been concentrating on primarily. The focus of the discussion has turned towards the context or the medium... the record. The inscription in a piece of plastic becomes the work of art. This way of focusing on the work of art as something being fixed in a medium, or even becoming synonymous with the medium, has been criticized. John Perry Barlow (1994), one of the more enthusiastic advocates for free digital information, has used a striking metaphor to describe this bias within copyright law. He describes the copyright practices as something which protects the bottle and not the wine. The ones struggling for harder copyright laws are, according to him, not very interested in the value of the music (the wine), but instead, they are very keen on protecting the records (the bottles). It's maybe because of this bias that the discussion about what really is a work of art hasn't been very prioritized in the copyright discussions of the music industry.

More widespread practices of modular á la carte creation may however lead to a situation where these kinds of questions have to be dealt with. If a lot of computer based creations are being done by using prefabricated elements, then what makes the works being created and

presented some kind of absolute entity, protected by copyright law? Couldn't the parts be combined in several other ways? By the way, what makes the work being presented something that should be considered as a final version. Couldn't it also be a kind of sketch? What actually is *the work*? With a computer several versions of a production can be saved during a working process. These savings can be presented as a work. They can also be reopened and adjusted a bit. Sounds can be added, removed and altered. Effects can be added, the song can be made longer, shorter etc. It is relatively easy to create a new mix.

If we now consider that the elements which are being used in a mix, or in the production of a version, are being made available to other producers. Or should we call them consumers? If they have compatible software they are able to make new mixes and versions. Should we call these works remixes, reworks or cover-versions? We can continue to make examples of different ways of digital creation. It's important to consider what makes a work become a work. Is it a work when it is registered by some copyright organization, or when it is inscribed in a record? If the elements of these works are being freely shared over the Internet, does it lead to plagiarism or to the birth of new works?

Modular á la carte creation with digital media can lead to complex situations within popular culture. New ways of combining elements into creations open up doors. The doors that are being opened may not be possible to close again. Therefore it can be worth keeping an eye on the possibilities of LEGO-like creations, especially as LEGO recurs in several contexts in today's economy.

LEGO-management

LEGO is a standardized toy. Think about the limitations of combinations with the plastic bricks, and compare it with the possibilities of variation when playing with, for example, clay. In building with LEGO, the limitations that are incorporated in the concept are reproduced. Pieces are connected to other pieces by an easy concept, where knobs on the plastic pieces fit in other pieces holes.

The simple standardized concept can offer speed and flow in the building process, while the limitations of the concept can make the combinations predictable. Standardization can increase productivity and creativity but it also reproduces structures. (cf. Joerges & Czarniawska, 1998). These properties of the toy should be considered when conceptual congruities occur between LEGO and digital media and when LEGO-like concepts emerge in popular culture. The

LEGO-concept is also a link between popular culture and business management. Boxes with LEGO's have been opened in several company board rooms.

In business management, making the right combinations is crucial. Mix-related questions arise... How to choose the right strategy, how to choose the right line of products, and how to choose members for a successful team. Open sesame or closing down. One of today's actors who promises guidance through the business world when it comes to choosing the right or wrong mix is... (surprise!) the danish toy producer, LEGO. Together with the Swiss based research group, Imagination Lab, they offer the product "LEGO Serious Play". The modular, colorful, plastic bricks have become tools for those in power.

How do you combine management with LEGO? Managers are being gathered group-wise into a room with some thousand LEGO-pieces as a physical aid to make them conceive and communicate their versions of how the organisation works or could work. Together with the LEGO-pieces, a manual for strategy building called "The Imaginopedia" is shipped. By building and combining with hands and bits of plastic, a mental and communicative feedback loop will hopefully occur. The LEGO Serious Play concept is related to other managerial learning and improvement-techniques like "action based learning", in which group-wise physical activities, such as climbing and trekking, are intended to open up for change within groups and organizations. LEGO Serious Play consists of several product kits. One available product is "The Enterprise Kit", which is:

A kit for 10 people comprising five megaboxes of more than 5800 LEGO® elements. They include special assortments for constructing identities, landscapes, connections and Simple Guiding Principles, as well as 10 individual Starter Modules. The kit is packaged with 10 Imaginopedias.(www.seriousplay.com)

The question "Why LEGO Bricks for strategy?" is answered by focusing on the plastic brick's power to work as a catalyst for thoughts as well as on its versatility.

LEGO Serious Play draws on the inherent versatility and dynamics of LEGO bricks in a constructive way. It encourages a free exchange of opinions through a shared language using metaphors to visualize ideas and perceptions. The LEGO bricks are a catalyst for people's thoughts as well as a versatile strategic tool.(ibid)

By playing with plastic bricks and by combining them in the right way, the intent is to achieve better strategies. But when it is written that the toy is a catalyst for people's thoughts, what does

it mean? Are there some special thoughts that are being conjured up by LEGO and it's modular concept?

LEGO-pieces can make fantasies and associations travel in a somewhat fixed direction. Click together, and take apart, fast, intuitively and rationally standardized. The first application of LEGO Serious play that was launched got the name "Real Time Strategy" and was symptomatically marketed by stressing it's speed. The application is said to enable: "A better strategy making process that works, works fast and works for everyone in the enterprise". With the discrete, connectable and colorful LEGO-pieces images and visions of a possible future should quickly be conjured up. (cf. Berg 2000).

When LEGO's are being used as an aid to think about organizations, they are also being used to think about humans. What similarities are there between humans and LEGO-characters of plastic? The more people were like LEGO's, the less problems with incompatibility would occur. The plastic pieces are normally always possible to combine. They seldom protest when knobs are being put in other pieces' holes. LEGO's can invoke an illusion of a uniform reality consisting of compatible parts, admittedly multicolored, but still uniform in shape and property. Pieces and characters can be clicked together on a board and they stay in their place as long as the play lasts.

Is it these kinds of compatible characters that are assumed to be employed in the companies that build strategies with LEGO Serious play? Individually colored but also uniform, and ready to flexibly follow both the vision and mission of the company as well as the capricious movements of the industry? The workers should ideally be flexible, quick, and work as independent modular entities, like entrepreneurs under the roof of the enterprise, always ready to adapt to decisions being made somewhere else in the organization. LEGO Serious play can be a fun tool for management. But it can also give side-effects which are not noticeable when the LEGO-box is opened.

The Potential Magic of Mixing

What can these examples from popular culture and the business world tell us about the potential magic of combinations? To put things together can be something utterly trivial. Yet combinations can also give surprising and unexpected results. What happens when business management is mixed with popular culture, and when the á la carte creations of popular culture are influenced by the modularity of digital media? What happens when a modular toy is applied in the strategy-

building of business management? What takes place on a micro-level in the specific mix-situations, and what consequences do the modular mix-processes have on a larger scale?

A mix or combination of some elements can work as a trigger. Lewis Sykes uses Jaques Attali's thought provoking book "Noise: The Political Economy of Music" (1977), as a point of departure, discussing the relation between digital media and music. He also writes about practices of mixing and composition. He quotes Matt Black, a member of the music collective Coldcut, who formulates his look upon the mixing of music and ideas: "Generating a new idea involves the hybridisation of material. Ideas should collide, bite, and have sex with each other in the same way that genetic DNA does." (In Sykes, 2001:26). Black highlights *the hybrid* as something that can emerge in a mix. The biological merging of the genetic properties of different individuals into their offspring is of course an ancient practice, which yet has almost magical connotations.

Ideas about hybridisation lay close to thoughts about *synergy effects*, which is a popular theme in business management. Simply put, synergy is the observation that two agents combined produce greater results than could be obtained by those same agents separately. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica synergism is the: "interaction of discrete agencies (as industrial firms), agents (as drugs), or conditions such that the total effect is greater than the sum of the individual effects". Synergy is something more or less unexpected that emerges in a mix. It is often hard to predict which occasions synergy effects may occur in.

A third result of mixing can be the juxtaposition that is associated with modernistic art-forms such as collage and assemblage. Nigel Thrift quotes M. Elkaim's description of the assemblage:

The concept of assemblage draws on the assemblages created by certain surrealist painters and sculptors. The simplest example is the famous Bull's Head created by Picasso in 1942: in this assemblage, a bicycle handlebar placed on a saddle invokes a bull's head. On the basis of separate elements – heterogenous elements placed in relationship to one another – an assemblage breathes life into the elements that compose it and induces a novel perception of reality (In: Thrift, 2001:421)

A mix or combination can like the assemblage give new meaning to the elements that are placed in relationship to one another. Or a mix can result in hybridization or synergy effects. It can also be seen as the mixing of different elements can work in an almost alchemical way. The word alchemy invokes associations to mystical practices in medieval vaults where different ingredients were mixed according to esoteric formulas in a quest for finding a quintessential prima materia. But alchemy can also simply mean a power or process of transforming something common into something special. In popular culture the right mix can be the key to a artistic breakthrough. In

business management the combination of different divisions or actors can hopefully lead to a powerful organisation, maybe through mystical synergy effects.

Alchemical and synergetic outcomes may be seen as open sesame-effects. Something new is created and doors may open. But “When do these open sesame-effects actually occur?”, and “What doors are being opened?” are questions worth asking. There is a potential tension between the rational and foreseeable dimensions of modular practices of combination and a longing for more unpredictable alchemical results of mixing. Considering this tension, it will be interesting to see what comes out of the processes in which the fascination for magic within today’s economy collides with á la carte creation and modular LEGO-like combination practices.

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