Interview

Interview with Tony O'Driscoll

TWC Editor

[0.1]   *Abstract*—An interview with Tony O'Driscoll, a professor at Duke University and a consultant in corporate innovation.

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1. Introduction

[1.1]   Tony O'Driscoll is professor of the practice of business administration at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business (http://www.fuqua.duke.edu/) and a consultant to corporate organizations in the areas of organization learning, knowledge management, change management, business strategy, technology disruption, and corporate innovation. Professor O'Driscoll has recently coauthored the IBM Institute for Business Value's paper "Leadership in a Distributed World: Lessons From Online Gaming" (http://www-935.ibm.com/services/uk/bcs/pdf/report3g510-6611-00_leadership-online_gaming.pdf) on the applicability of massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) practices to the corporate organization.

[1.2]   Tony O'Driscoll's blog can be found at http://wadatripp.wordpress.com/.

[1.3]   *The following TWC editorial team member contributed to this interview: Mafalda Stasi.*

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2. Interview

[2.1]   **Q:** I'll start with a fairly open-ended question. In "Lessons From Online Gaming," you make the case for business being potentially transformed by gaming. How about the ways gaming has been transformed by business? And in both cases, is the planned, top-down transformation actually more important or powerful than the grassroots, bottom-up one happening organically?

[2.2]   **TO:** Gaming itself is big business, and I have had the good fortune of working as a consultant to companies in that industry.

[2.3]   Whether you come at it from the gaming industry perspective or from the perspective of gaming sensibilities making their way into industry in general, at core is the fact that as we move from a world where we connect to the Web to one where we connect through and within it, the enriched communication and social interaction is changing how we live, work, and play.

[2.4]   From the gaming industry perspective, it is clear that management understands and values creativity and innovation, and structures groups and rewards in ways similar to what I have observed in games. At the same time, there is a lot of inefficiency that ships with the freight in nurturing human creativity, and gaming industry leaders are looking for ways to become more efficient without sacrificing the creative spark that fuels mass adoption of a new gaming title.

[2.5]   On the enterprise side of things, it is clear that most organizations are still operating under the bureaucratic model developed by Alfred Sloan in the 1900s. This system of a "head" quarters where people devised strategy and plans and then hired "hands" to carry out the work, where information flowed from top to bottom and bureaucrats kept score via cash flow and income statements and balance sheets, has pervaded all industries. However, as we have moved from an era of planned, predictable futures built primarily around forecasts of selling tangible goods to an economy that is more service oriented and digitally mediated, things have become less predictable.

[2.6]   In the services-driven, information-age economy, the need for collaborative cocreation of new offerings at the edge of the enterprise is becoming increasingly important. This in turn raises the question whether the bureaucracy that was created to optimize efficiency in the industrial age is the best enterprise governance system to drive innovation and creativity in the information age.

[2.7]   As we set out to explore the question of what the enterprise of the future might look like 50 years out in an age that is increasingly interconnected, digitally mediated, global, and knowledge driven, it occurred to us that massively multiplayer online role-playing games might be a good proxy to give us some clues. MMORPG players are global, the work they do in guilds is digitally mediated, and the team's roles and responsibilities are always in flux as a result of the personnel available at the time and the nature of the task at hand. So we thought that perhaps this might be a good place to study how work gets accomplished in order to provide some clues as to how the future of enterprise might take shape.

[2.8]   So in one sense, gaming is just another industry, but by the very nature of the products that it creates, it is one that is probably more astutely grappling with the optimal structure and incentive schemes to drive creativity and efficiency. However, I believe that many other industries will follow suit. At the end of the day, you can't shrink your way to greatness. Organic growth through innovation is the ticket to larger market share, and companies that take time to understand how collaborative cocreation is afforded via the Web will most likely lead the pack by creating sustainable innovative competitive advantage.

[2.9]   **Q:** You point out the many ways in which being a corporate leader and being a MMORPG gamer are similar activities. Yet many gamers define themselves in oppositional, antiestablishment terms: in your study of corporate employees who are gamers, some respondents basically took the position that corporations and gaming have incompatible outlooks. Is it possible to perform the same activities with opposite intentions, and in so doing to bring about opposite outcomes? Can you also tell us a bit more about the ways in which corporate leaders and MMORPG gamers are different?

[2.10]   **TO:** Our study clearly showed that the activities identified in the Sloan model of distributed leadership get exercised within MMORPGs. Not only do they get exercised, they get exercised more often than in the real world because of the volunteer nature of guild membership and the speed of progression in game activity. So as a leadership lab, it is clear that the skills associated with enterprise leadership can be exercised via guild leadership in game play.

[2.11]   When you talk about gamers being oppositional and antiestablishment, it is important to clarify what they are against. I would say that they are not against creating value, but they are against rules and strictures that are vestiges of industrial-age enterprises blocking them from self-organizing around a given endeavor to create value. There are many Web 2.0 examples that can be cited here, most notably the creation of software such as Linux. The rules of engagement and reputational capital of programmers allowed a ragtag bunch of software developers to self-organize around the endeavor of creating a better operating system. By all accounts, if you look at Linux adoption today, we would have to declare it a success. So while gamers may be characterized as antiestablishment (defined here as the traditional hierarchy and command-and-control resource model), it could be that they have a point.

[2.12]   **Q:** Many people have pointed out that Web 2.0 is largely based on voluntary, unpaid labor. In "Lessons From Online Gaming," you point out how work and play "are becoming much more similar than executives might suspect" (3), and you put this in win-win terms: "the game of global business will be more fun, leaders will gain an edge over their competitors, and the odds of seeing the 'game over' message flash on the screen will be reduced" (12). Is there a potential for a negative scenario of

exploitation, power imbalance, and diminishing returns? If corporations extend their influence on individuals through a conflation of work and play, isn't there a danger that it all becomes work and people have no play left?

[2.13] **TO:** Michel Shrage argues that almost all creative endeavors involve play. Play is inseparable from work when it comes to creativity. Play is how children figure things out and how engineers and designers come upon the killer application of category killer product. I think that there is a false dichotomy between work and play. The first bows were devised to be pulled across stringed instruments to make music, then someone figured out you could make an arrow and use the same bow to kill prey to feed your family. The moral of that story is that from play comes utility. Gordon McKenzie, then creative paradox at Hallmark Cards, taught me that, and I am a firm believer in it, having seen firsthand how Shoebox Greeting cards are made.

[2.14] I believe that as we become further immersed in the information age, it will become increasingly important to invoke play into daily work to cut through the routine and mundaneness associated with many analyst-type roles. We are already seeing this pop up in different industries where gaming techniques and incentive schema are being applied for everything from recognizing and naming craters on a newly identified planet to coming up with a commercial spacecraft.

[2.15] **Q:** In your study of 214 gamers-cum-professionals, you do not mention the gender or the race split at all. Is this intentional? Do you think that these variables are not significant in either the corporate milieu or the gaming one?

[2.16] **TO:** Having studied games and virtual worlds for quite some time, it is clear that this is not the domain of 17-year-old, testosterone-overloaded, spotty-faced males. We know the average age for gamers is 30 and that the gender splits roughly 60 percent male and 40 percent female. We also know that increasingly, digital immigrants are pervading the workforce. In *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation Is Reshaping Business Forever* (2004), John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade suggest that there are already 13 million gamers who are gainfully employed in corporate America and that 7 percent of managers are gamers. So we really did not choose to focus on the age/gender questions in our study.

[2.17] With respect to the IBM sample, we sought out executives who had significant gaming experience, so if there was any skew in age and gender, there it was on the basis that our starting sample point was those individuals who had made it up through the ranks at IBM.

[2.18] The key point to make here is that the digital natives who have grown up with multiple digital identities and a multitude of mechanisms for coordination and

communication are going to demand that their enterprise provide them with at least as good a collaboration infrastructure as they enjoy in their private life. Right now I believe it is fair to say that the enterprise infrastructures lag behind the Web 2.0 social media opportunities that corporate citizens enjoy as private citizens. This gap will have to be addressed if today's blue-chip enterprises hope to continue to attract the best and brightest creative professionals into their ranks.

[2.19]   **Q:** The question of affective engagement is gaining ground in current media study discourse, and it is equally topical for those interested in organizational learning. Henry Jenkins optimistically points out how "convergence culture" can leverage the affective engagement of, say, a young Harry Potter fan to help her learn to write better through fan fiction. Yet at a recent conference, you pointed out how many of our current institutional educational practices are counterproductive, reducing or stomping out any positive affective engagement with the subject. How convinced are you that we can indeed square the circle and channel individual affective engagement institutionally? Or are we ultimately trying to mandate spontaneity?

[2.20]   **TO:** Of all industry, I believe it is fair to say that education is the one that has changed the least over time. Before the invention of the printing press, we had a guild system with apprentices at the feet of masters who learned within the context of doing. Rules like "measure twice, cut once" became viscerally clear as the experienced master guided the journeyman through mistakes with words of wisdom that were internalized right at the point where the teachable moment appeared. With the printing press, context became separated from content, and declarative and procedural knowledge became codified so that it could be taught in the classroom. This was a good thing in that it allowed access to so many more people who had a hunger for learning. It was a bad thing in that the classroom model can only go so far in building true competence.

[2.21]   There is no mastery without guided practical application. With the advent of worldwide avatar-mediated communication and collaboration, I believe we have the opportunity to usher in a new "guilded" age—one where praxis follows theory, and where those in the know can share with those wanting to know through application and experience while doing. The classroom will never go away. It has its place in building capability, but the virtual world presents a significant opportunity to bring guided, experiential learning back into our instructional approaches. And with it, I believe, will come accelerated learning curves and time to competency.

[2.22]   **Q:** Let's explore your own subject position. You have a custom-made *Second Life* avatar that looks like you. Are you comfortable with defining your relationship with gaming in affective terms? In other words, would you call yourself a gamer and/or a gaming fan? If not, what is your view of fans and their activities?

[2.23]   **TO:** There is a lot in this question. I have ADD and I am very curious, so I learned early on that I needed to moderate environments as interesting as MMORPGs or virtual worlds. T. L. Taylor has done a lot of research on gamers and gaming, as has Henry Jenkins. I would not classify myself as a hard-core gamer. I actually spend more time in virtual worlds exploring possibilities for learning and collaboration than in the themed fantasy worlds of MMORPGs—not because I don't like them, but precisely because I might like them a wee bit too much.

[2.24]   **Q:** A different way of putting the question of subjectivity is, how do you see yourself in transformative terms? I mean, you are both an academic and an industry consultant. How do you morph your theory and your praxis when moving from one activity to the other? Are they two separate areas that require an adjustment in your perspective and practices, or do you see it as a unified field where you move seamlessly and effortlessly?

[2.25]   **TO:** I have to borrow a theme or two from Kevin Kelly here. He says that if the Internet has taught us anything to date, it is that we need to get better at believing in the impossible. The Mosaic browser was released on April 22, 1993. It turns 16 this year, and the impact it has had on how we live work and play has been profound. Today, via my iPhone, I have access to nearly every information service I could imagine, and many of them are free. If I had predicted that 10 years ago as an academic, I would have been labeled a fool. Kevin also says that in this day and age what is possible in practice is sometimes not possible in theory. This is precisely why I strive to straddle the fence between academia and consulting. I work hard to bring my empirical side to the trends I see going on in industry in order to get some generalizable data to substantiate positive movement on the S curve of diffusion. I would be lying if I did not say that it means I am constantly stretched, but I'd also be lying if I said that I did not love the challenge. Just like the magic circle in game design, this delicate balance between theory and practice keeps me in the flow.

3. Works cited

Beck, J., and W. Mitchell. 2004. *Got game: How the gamer generation is reshaping business forever.* Boston: Harvard Business School.

Taylor, T. L. 2006. *Play between worlds.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.