

Chapter **9****From ‘My First Business Day’ to  
‘The Secret Millionaire’s Club’**Learning to manage from early on *Alf Rehn***Introduction**

Management is normally perceived as the quintessentially serious, adult activity. At the same time, the themes of business and management are not unknown in children’s culture, and closer scrutiny shows that such themes are actually quite prevalent. From classics such as Scrooge McDuck and Richie Rich, to modern examples such as the game ‘School Tycoon’ and the cartoon ‘The Secret Millionaire’s Club,’ the ethos of managerialism has found a multitude of ways to present itself as normal, natural and fun to children. In this chapter I will discuss the ways in which notions of management pervade children’s everyday life, with a particular emphasis on the ways in which popular culture functions as a kind of business pre-school. Of special interest here is the way in which management is presented as a normal and moral activity, and how the accouterments of the business world are positioned as a natural development path for the budding organization man. However, I will also try to point out that the forms of management discourse and phenomena that can be observed in the sphere of children’s culture do not represent a one-way affair, and that we also need to take children’s own agency into account when discussing management. In the end, what looks like indoctrination might simply be our view of a phenomenon that might be much more complex, and much more fun.

When people talk about management, they talk about adults. In fact, they are quite monomaniacal about it. Even though management is an ever- and omnipresent phenomenon, those writing about it have normally worked from the adult-centric assumption that one has to be at least some 16 years to really be

touched by the world of business, and subsequently all of management studies is written by and about adults. Even in those few cases when someone inquires into how organizations are represented in children's cultures (see e.g. Ingersoll and Adams, 1992; Grey, 1998; Rhodes, 2002) this is done mainly in order to find out how organizations are represented, not in order to think about the children (Cue Helen Lovejoy: 'Will someone please think of the children?!?') – let alone in order to think about children's management. Children are, of course, used to this kind of marginalization and one might even say that the experience of being ignored is one of the fundamental aspects of kids' identity-work. Despite (or perhaps thanks to) this, there exists an entire un-researched world of management, namely that of how the processes, images and symptomatics of management exist, play out and mutate in children's life-worlds. I will in this chapter discuss some of the forms this might take.

One could argue that children are not only subject to management, they are in fact inundated by/in it. Whereas most adults live their life in such a way as to have a manager hovering over them for some set amount of time of the day (increasing, but not yet at full coverage), children mostly have not one but several people enacting management-like powers over them and doing so during all hours of the day. Most visible are of course the parents, who will not only drag you out of bed at too early a time, but also force you to go to bed way too early, thus clearly extending normal management powers quite forcibly into the realm of biopower. Often these same powers of management will also tell you when to eat, decide what you're allowed or not allowed to eat, and tell you to go urinate before you go out the door regardless if you feel like it or not. Despite all the talk of subjugation in the workplace, most (but not all) companies will still allow for unguarded bio-breaks and only very rarely control bedtimes (see, however, Hancock, 2008). And if this wouldn't be bad enough, parents are only one layer of management in the lives of children – the other layers being things such as grandparents (well known for enacting highly confusing compensation-systems), teachers (with their outdated knowledge management regimes), and a sundry bunch of coaches drilling them in either individual excellence (e.g. the violin) or team-work (e.g. football). Further, one of the most challenging things a child has to do is to manage the complexities of the contemporary social scene among children, one where affiliations and friendships are constantly renegotiated and reshaped ('unfriending' each other on Facebook and so on) and where both the material culture of childhood and the increasing time pressures of modern life have to be factored in. I mean, do *you* know who should be picked first when putting together a war party in WoW (World of Warcraft), particularly when mom said you can only play for two hours? To this we also have to include the financial constraints of being a kid in a consumption society, where the buying power of pocket money is constantly challenged and where the collectable cards which were worth a fortune 2 weeks ago might be uncool and worthless today.

To an extent, this could be understood as just playing with words. Mom and dad are not managers, going to the bathroom before a long trip is just common sense, and football-practice is not part of the labor process (but then again, who's being

naïve here?). However, this does not mean that management is absent from the life of children, nor that management (in different guises) isn't becoming more and more important. While part of my telling might be seen as merely throwing the discourse of management onto something much more innocent, there is in society today a strive for increasing management in all areas of everyday life, so it seems only logical that childhood and children's culture should also be affected. I will in the following point to a number of ways in which this is happening, and also show how the adult-centric worldview of management studies has created a number of lacunas in our understanding of how management and business are becoming evermore embedded into our lives. But before this is done, a few clarifications may be in order.

When we talk about children and management, we need to separate the notion of children being managed from children managing, and further from management as an element in children's culture. It is particularly this last thing I am interested in here, and even more specifically I am interested in the ways in which management becomes *children's* culture and not only an adult interjection into an assumed pure field. The dynamics that is created between how management is introduced into this culture and the ways in which children through their cultural consumption create a hybridized form of management is thus the main theme in writing this. My underlying assumption here is that children do in fact learn about management from a very early age, and that both this learning and the way in which this learning inevitably includes translational effects (i.e. making management more 'childish') affect society more broadly – as children do have a nasty habit of growing up.

I will in the following discuss how the world of business, of work, of management and of global market capitalism can be learnt by consuming children's culture. This will be done by engaging with a series of popular culture artifacts, and seeing how these can be read to give us a more multifaceted view of what management might mean in the everyday life of children. I will in doing so try to show how the meeting of the child and the management discourse must be read as a dynamic process, and will engage with techniques of critical reading such as those suggested by people like Slavoj Žižek (1991, 1992), Martin Parker (2002, 2007), Carl Rhodes (2001, 2002) and Damian O'Doherty (2007).

## Learning about business

Although there is a sometimes baffling amount of work done on management education, and a lively and interesting ongoing discussion about how we learn to become managed subjects, very little attention has been paid to how early socialization plays into this (see, however, O'Dell, 1978; Grey, 1998). The implicit assumption in most of the debate is that the areas for learning about management are primarily two – business school and working life. While it is doubtlessly true that these spheres have a huge impact on both our discourses, our way of being,

and our way of living, I want to argue that we actually enter these already equipped with a tremendous amount of images and ideas about management, and that this has been insufficiently studied (cf. Hancock and Tyler, 2004).

Let us start by asking a very simple question: As we learn about money, business and management, who is the archetype and iconic figure through which we come into this? Is there a *primus inter pares* among management icons, one that would meet us before we are socialized into management? My very serious answer would be Scrooge McDuck. The Disney corporation is without the slightest shadow of a doubt the biggest purveyor of entertainment content to Western children today, and their properties are also among the best known brands in the world. While a child in rural China will probably not know who Steve Jobs is, he or she will almost certainly have at least seen the Disney-characters, and may in fact be fluent in the Disney mythology. Disney Publishing worldwide reaches an average of 100 million readers monthly, publishes more than 250 magazines and sells some 120 million children's books each year, with additional millions seeing the TV-shows, the DVDs, the computer games, the websites and so on.

In the Disney universe, Scrooge McDuck stands as one of the oldest and best-known figures. He is Donald Duck's uncle, incredibly wealthy ('The Richest Duck in the World™'), and obsessed with money. He is definitively a quadzillionaire, and his total wealth has at one point been valued at five multiplujillion, nine impossidillion, seven fantasticatrillion dollars and sixteen cents. A born entrepreneur [in Kirzner's (1985) sense], he will do almost anything to get richer, and becomes physically ill when forced to part with even the slightest sum. His desire to hoard cash (and swim in it) has been the object of awe for generations of children, and his money bin overlooking Duckburg has in all likelihood been coveted by hundreds of thousands of children at some point in their life – I myself had an unhealthy childhood fascination with Scrooge's treasure. Interestingly, while McDuck obviously is the most well-known entrepreneur and capitalist in the world, there is little to nothing written about him from a management point of view (see, however, Dorfman and Mattelart, 1971/2003). Assuming that childhood impressions affect how we learn things in adult life, as I believe one can, this omission seems strange indeed. As Scrooge is one of the first examples of a clearly identified businessman most children come in contact with, one can assume that this meeting will color how children (and in extension adults) will view such things as entrepreneurs and capitalists. In fact, as the figure of Scrooge is so clearly iconic, we might even say that he establishes an archetype in our culture, that of the businessman as greedy, obsessive and single-minded.

However, the subtext of Scrooge's adventures establishes something much more complex. While it is true that the figure in itself is painted as eccentric and even slightly ludicrous (his attachment to the Number One Dime – the first coin he ever made – could, if analyzed by Slavoj Žižek, probably be fodder for an entire book), it also establishes that business is an adventure, and that cunning and thrift is a good way to become a success. Whilst the strive for ever more money might be presented as somewhat odd, the results of Scrooge's passions tend to be fantastic: mystical treasures, cultural experiences and various kinds of

hi-jinx. The simple case of sourcing raw materials for a kind of chocolate may in the world of Scrooge very well involve discovering a long-lost tribe and culture, negotiating a complex business deal – interestingly enough, there seems to be an almost endless line of tribes who have massive amounts of a raw material like oil or metals and who want to trade these for soda-bottle caps (Veiled critique of capitalism or the fevered dream of Adam Smith? Let the children judge) – and often enough a happy end for all. This final point is the most important one. Scrooge's adventures do not always result in the best possible outcome for himself, but instead tend to assure the greatest possible benefit for the greatest possible amount of people – utilitarianism defined and prettily presented.

In other words, even though Scrooge is presented as an eccentric, and as somewhat pathological, he is also shown as a necessary and natural phenomenon in the world. His desires, odd though they might be, lead to exciting adventures and often result in happiness for a surprising amount of people. In fact, it is not uncommon for the *denouement* of an adventure being that Scrooge acts completely against his nature, giving away things, saving Christmas (i.e. acting like his namesake Ebenezer Scrooge), and so on. Although a superficial reading of the character (and his ubiquity in global children's culture) might either emphasize the sheer mental imbalance of the character, thus making it a case of subtextual critique of capitalism, or look to the success of the selfsame and thereby seeing it as a cheap ideological trick played on children, the fact is that reading Scrooge may be a multilayered learning set. What children learn from reading Donald Duck is not a straightforward paean to the market economy, but rather that the economy is both many-faceted and comes with a complex moral order. Scrooge may seem like *homo oeconomicus*, but is in fact driven by strong passions and is quite capable of acting 'against' his nature.

So, what does this show us? Much of what has been stated in the previous parts of this text could be discounted by simply stating that it is quite natural that popular culture mirrors the society it exists. There is nothing inherently interesting in the fact that popular culture contains depictions of the business world, nor that managers play certain roles therein. Even though I contend that one needs to pay attention to the patterns and iconic descriptions that children consume and that might have an impact on how they will view similar things later in life, the consumption of such popular depictions should probably be seen as a normal and even necessary aspect of culture. Obviously, we cannot generalize from a single case, not even from such a culturally pervasive one as Scrooge. Yet, what this case shows us is that not only do themes of organization, management and business exist in children's culture – it would be a stunning result indeed if they didn't – they can be understood as a form of 'sentimental education'. The few studies on the business organizations in this field have tended to emphasize the ideological taint in such representations (see Grey, 1998), or in the case of Ingersoll and Adams's (1992) work, inquire into how 'technical rationality' is learnt at an early age. Here, the underlying assumption tends to be that children are uncritical, that children's culture is a simplified version of adult culture, and that the themes that we can find are simply reduced

varieties of greater narratives from the 'real' world – that is children's worlds are assumed to be unreal, undeveloped, and therefore fairly unimportant. I would contend that this only captures part of the whole of children and management. Instead of seeing Scrooge (or any other cultural representation) as a one-way communication/brainwashing, can we understand the sphere of childhood as having a management dimension all of its own?

I would, in a manner at least partly reminiscent of how Rhodes (2001) has analyzed *The Simpsons* as a carnivalesque challenge to more mainstream understandings of management and organization, claim that an understanding of Scrooge cannot be reduced to merely seeing him as a caricature of ravenous capitalism. Monty Burns, the evil capitalist in *The Simpsons* is both a menace and laughably decrepit, and this dual portrayal should not be flattened out. A reading of Rhodes would say that it is at the moment when Burns is made to look like a fool when he in fact becomes most dangerous, as it is at such moments when we are led to believe that he is unthreatening. Similarly, the important part in the chronicles of Scrooge might not be the ones where he is portrayed as greedy and profiteering, but rather the moments when he does good. For what is the nature of the foremost capitalist in the world? The social theorist Slavoj Žižek has in a series of books (see e.g. Žižek, 1991, 1992) suggested modes of reading popular culture that both takes their surface effects seriously, but also tries to inquire into what these effects are the symptom of. In the case of Scrooge, both the effects and their cause seem very simple at first. Scrooge is greedy (for capitalists are greedy), so he is cheap and tries to trick people. The lesson, then, would be that capitalists are not to be trusted (and misers). But a reading in the spirit of Žižek would turn this analysis around, and instead see what alternative story lies underneath. Here, Scrooge's greed could be understood as a symptom, and the adventures are ways in which he tries to feed his greed, knowing full well that he will never have hoarded enough money. However, the moment of catharsis does not come when Scrooge makes more money, but when he is acting 'against' his nature – such as when he donates toys to Duckburg's children or saves Christmas. This is the moment when he overcomes his symptom, and finds happiness by curing the underlying trauma that has resulted in his greed. In the scope of a comic book, such things are possible. What is insidious here is that children may well read this story with greater subtlety than adults are capable of (cf. Zipes, 1983). In this reading, Scrooge becomes a rather lovable character – capable of doing an enormous amount of good by being insanely rich, and always having the possibility of acting in a way that brings the greatest possible happiness to the greatest number of people. Children might thus come away learning that all the avarice and exploitation that adults see in Scrooge in fact are means to an end, as business will end up saving Christmas.

In other words, learning about business is no easy matter, and involves an engagement with children's culture that adults may have either never had or already forgotten. Further, this learning is not simply one of transmitting ideals, but makes demands on children, who may learn in ways very much different from what we initially assume. Still, this initial stop on our whistle-stop tour of children's

culture is admittedly a very abstract one, where the child will be reading about things that may not feel particularly real. To flesh out this understanding, we need to consider the labor process.

## Learning to work

One of my most cherished possessions is a set of toys for dress-up and make-believe play (cf. Parker, 2007). Such sets have been popular playthings for as long as commercial toys have existed, and can probably be traced back to the use of masks and outfits in tribal cultures. Iconic games like dressing up to play cowboys and Indians, or toy versions of a doctor's equipment and trademark white coat, have played a part in children's culture for a very long time. The set I bought is in one sense a continuation of this, but in another sense something much stranger. Its full name is the 'My First Business Day Playset' (cf. Rehn, 2004), and contains over 20 pieces of playtime goodness, including but not limited to an attaché case in blue plastic, a wallet with playmoney and credit cards, a PDA (with incoming email and a displayed pie-chart), a mobile phone, keys for the office (one of which *might* lead to the executive bathroom) and security ID tag (this last item fascinates me no end). On the box, a boy of four or five years is displayed wearing a crisp white shirt, a tie, talking into the playphone (held between ear and shoulder, trader-style) and taking notes on his PDA.

This could obviously be interpreted as the most dystopic toy ever created, where little Timmy or Tammy Trader are schooled and cowed into white-collar hell from preschool onward, where the business PDA and the ID tag's connection to a personal identity-destroying surveillance regime is naturalized through the medium of toys. Another reading of the same might emphasize the educational benefits of teaching children what a lot of people are doing all day, and thus make the world of the adult a little less threatening and incomprehensible. One could even in the spirit of Slavoj Žižek (1991) suggest a complete turn of the interpretive gaze and see this playset as something of a critical break. A Žižekian reading would suggest that our culture is creating these weird symptoms of the capitalist order not in order to make it more palatable to children, but as a way to handle the trauma that much of the adult world of management is rather childish and jejune. There would in such a reading be no 'serious' core to the toy, no need to read anything into it. The most radical possibility might in fact be that there is no agenda to the playset – it is just a small version of another set of toys, a surface standing in for another surface. By creating the playset through which even a four-year old can pretend to be a businessman, we can in part deal with the inanity of working life, and in a sense transfer our unconscious suspicion that it is all a game of dress-up. The child thus carries the trauma of the adult, not in order to train the child for what is to come, but rather to handle the adult's sense of fundamental irreality present in business life.

Such a reading would be close to the notion of queering and performativity that has been suggested by Martin Parker (2002). Here Parker has suggested that one could see and study management at least partly as a form of role-play, drawing on queer theorists like Judith Butler in arguing that just like we need to learn how to play at being 'woman', we need to learn how to put on the role of the manager – complete with suit and accouterments. For a person that feels there is too much uncertainty, upholding the boundaries partly becomes an evermore intense desire of finding the proper role and fitting costume. The playset does something similar, but whereas the role-play suggested by Parker seems to be driven by uncertainty and fear, the play of the child seems a lot less neurotic. One could even see that the anguish that Parker identifies is transferred to the child, who may be better equipped to carry it. Where management is part of the social construction of adulthood (Harding, 2003), there may – and I am here referring to the ways in which Žižek has called attention to the traumas that are created when a united subject such as, for example, an adult, professional manager is attempted – be a need for a dissolving of this construction, a breathing space for management.

Regardless of which kind of reading one prefers, such playsets – in which we could also include computer games consoles and mobile phones, not to mention board-games – present to the children that play with them a business life with a Janus-like face. On the one hand we can see a clear socializing aspect to them, a way to train children in the harsh reality of office life (see Parker, 2007), but at the same time these open up for the kinds of rebellion and subversion that play has always been good at (cf. Huizinga, 1955). When the accouterments of the grown-up world of management are brought into play, they also show how easy it is to ridicule, mock and pervert the iconic act of 'being a manager' (see also Harding, 2003). The child who, armed with the 'My First Business Day' playset, goes around the schoolyard firing friends and teachers is not only playing at being a manager, he or she might be engaging in the quintessential form of critique available to children, that of questioning through play. This should obviously not be confused with the adult forms of critique (Why are we always so quick to assume that children are not capable of having their own, separate cultural forms?), but might instead point to what management *is* to children.

A more extreme example of this is the 'My First McJob' playset. Its real name is different ('The McDonald's Drive-Thru Playset'), but I have taken to using the more apt name, as the set consists of a full, child-size outfit of a McDonald's employee, complete with a simple cashier's point and a headset with which to take orders. Created as a collaboration between McDonald's and a toy manufacturer, this fun little set of toys in effect makes it possible for the child to pre-train him- or herself for the exciting world of working for minimum wage in the fast-food industry. From the perspective of the corporation, this is obviously very close to the perfect product. Not only does McDonald's get paid for products that serve as advertisements for their products (we should also note that while advertising to children is curbed and discouraged in many countries, making toys with logos is perfectly legal), they further get the added bonus of children making themselves (slightly) more

prepared to act as workers. Selling commodities, branding and the labor process, all wrapped up in shiny plastic – like something from a CEO's wet dream. But at the same time, this assumes that children are at best receptacles of managerial and corporate discourses, that children in their everyday life are unable to form their own opinions and their own understandings of that which they are subject to.

While it is quite obvious that children do react to advertising and that children's critical faculties are different (and quite probably less developed) than adults, the important thing to note is that while children's everyday lives are inundated with discourses and material artifacts that communicate managerial imagery and organizational frameworks, this does not mean that the transmission of the managerialist ethos is total and perfect. Drawing on the work of Fleming and Spicer (2003) one could postulate that children at least could use the described playsets in ways that would signify resistance and a cynical distance to the world of work, and at the very least we can assume that the way in which management templates are introduced into the world of children is changed to accommodate the lifeworld of the same, in a way that creates a much more hybrid cultural form than might be deduced from the material instantiations themselves.

In other words, the ways in which management is present in children's everyday life should be studied as a dynamic that is created through the interaction of two forces. On the one hand we have a very clear colonization of a sphere that we often implicitly assume exists 'beyond' management, where both the tools (as in playsets) and discourses (as seen in comics and other cultural forms) are introduced as normal and 'real'. Such forces arguably work to socialize and indoctrinate children into late capitalism (Ingersoll and Adams, 1992). But on the other side of this we have the very real and easily observed fact that child's play is a powerful transformative force, capable of turning things on their heads (cf. Bakhtin, 1939/1984; Huizinga, 1955; Rhodes, 2001). We simply cannot know the ways in which the accouterments of corporate life are appropriated by children, and may need to pay much more attention to how the lifeworld of the kids is constructed, and how in extension management is constructed therein. At the moment, there is very little research into anything like this, as we tend to assume that children's everyday life is merely a less developed version of adult's. This myopia has hindered our understanding of how one can take things such as the My First Business Day-playset and from this develop novel and creative interpretations of corporate life, and has in other words hindered our understanding of how we actually learn about work. Succinctly put, while we teach the children, the children teach us, or in the words of Wordsworth, 'The Child is father of the man'.

So far, we've worked from a position where children are either consuming culture or putting themselves into situations where they are in a subjected position. Clearly, much of economic life can be learnt through this, as much of the average wage-earners life can be described as a cycle of subjugation and consumption. However, for the purposes of this text, it is important that the juvenile agency that I've implied must be interrogated when discussing management in children's culture is brought more to fore. I will thus move onto discussing how children get to manage businesses.

## Learning to manage

An obvious sphere within which to investigate this dynamics of children creating a 'management of their own' would be to look at computer games. Obviously, children are not the only ones playing such games, but they do represent an avid group of players, and with the proliferation of information technology, it is increasingly common that a child learns about the world at least partly through the mediation of digital entertainment (Wolfe and Perron, 2003; Poole, 2004). This becomes particularly pronounced when it comes to the sphere of management and learning to handle the complexities of a larger organization, and the case of business games serves as an excellent example of just how children are socialized in the arts of commerce.

In 1990, genius game developer Sid Meier together with Microprose published the game *Railroad Tycoon*. The game, which is played on a mostly green map with heavily stylized graphics, simulates the running and development of a railroad company during the boom time for such endeavors. Gameplay consists mainly of planning tracks between stations and cities, and managing an increasingly complex network of logistic exchanges, where matters such as train carrying capacity, their cargo, shifting prices, varying demand and similar problems of preference, coupled with the odd unforeseeable event, come into play. The game attempts to mimic the market economy, complete with a small stock market where you can buy and sell stock in both the company you're running and in competing companies. Many found the strategic gameplay boring, but it also won over a cadre of dedicated fans. The game spawned several sequels and expansion packs, and also became a template of sorts. In 1991 the same Sid Meier would come to release *Civilization*, considered by game aficionados to be one of the best games ever made, as well as slightly more addictive than heroin.

*Railroad Tycoon* was not the first business simulator, as there were primitive equivalents on the very first personal computers, and many games before it that contained business elements. In 1984, the first version of the now almost deified *Elite* was released, a game which built on space trading and a complex economic model. In fact, business games have always had a niche of their own in the world of computer gaming. *Railroad Tycoon* was however different in being both a pure business game (*Elite* had a wider framework of space exploration and combat) and a mainstream success. It also started the trend of specific business simulations, many of which borrowed the word 'Tycoon' for their titles. Thus the original later begat *Airport Tycoon*, *Lemonade Tycoon*, *Zoo Tycoon*, *Pizza Tycoon*, *Casino Tycoon*, *Coffee Tycoon*, *Transport Tycoon*, *Monopoly Tycoon*, *Mall Tycoon*, *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, *Moon Tycoon*, *Transport Tycoon*, *School Tycoon* and *Prison Tycoon*, to mention a few. As this list should make clear, several of these were geared toward children, and one – *Lemonade Tycoon* – even went so far as to map out the way one (supposedly) could turn the iconic child's enterprise (a lemonade stand) into a corporation. Together with *Civilization*, *Railroad Tycoon* can be said to have ushered in the 'management game', where the most important aspect is the ability to administer an increasingly large network of activities. Although the

Sim-games, which got their start with *SimCity* (originally released in 1989), have a similar form of gameplay and development-history, their structure is closer to that of a civics lesson, and they exhibit a more complex relation to business.

Some of the newer releases in this series include *Prison Tycoon* and *School Tycoon*. In the former, the challenge is to establish, run and develop a prison, for maximum efficiency (and profit). By collecting fees, staffing, buying buildings and additions to these, the player tries to create the best prison he or she can. At set intervals, after reaching certain goals, one is afforded the chance to improve the facility further, all the way to a super-max prison. During all this, one has to check that one has money for the pay-roll, that the prisoners do not riot, and look out for the occasional fire. In *School Tycoon*, this same format is replicated, but now the important thing is not to build secure blocks, but athletic venues and new school buildings, and manage a school in a way that optimizes academic ability, how the school does in sports, discipline and so on. On one level these are simple building games, where the setting could just as well be a mall or a factory, the context being mainly to lend flavor to the game. For instance, whereas the two events clearly are different, there is a structural similarity between an infestation of farm pests in *John Deere American Farmer* and a prison riot in *Prison Tycoon*, as both stand as major events onset by a planning failure (often built in as a necessary result in the game) that need to be managed. Seen in this light, all games are structured in more or less the same way, as a series of problems to be solved by the player. All management games would likewise be similar, based on a structure of developing an endeavor and balancing conflicting forces. However, the way in which the Tycoon games show how endeavors can be turned into profitable companies, and how 'management' consists of a series of small decisions, with the surrounding world portrayed as a continuous chaos and an abstract adversary, might give us some insight into how children perceive the economy. The Tycoon series also communicates that the world needs, nay *demand*s management. With everything from soda-machines at schools to the building of a railroad being positioned within the context of 'managing', such games create a framework which make management seem like a natural and fun endeavor, as well as enabling children to 'play the corporation'. Looking at how children actually engage with games (see Sutton-Smith, 1997), we can see that they do not necessarily play 'according to the rules', but instead test and tweak the game, submit it to various kinds of stress (such as building impossible structures or trying to kill everyone through starvation), and so on. Playing at being a manager is thus not merely training in doing good and producing value, but also a form of hacking, where the role of management becomes something akin to leading a game or experimenting. The way in which children learn to manage might thus not be so much a process of learning the rules, but learning what can be done in a specific context – and experimenting with the rules. Again, the sphere that is created when popular cultural representations of management and corporate behavior meet the tinkering minds of children shows us several faces, making the field of 'children's management' a much more complex area of inquiry than we might immediately assume.

## The great game

On 8 February 2006 DIC Entertainment publish a press release announcing that they have partnered with investment guru and iconized billionaire Warren Buffett to create a direct-to-DVD animated series entitled ‘The Secret Millionaire’s Club’, scheduled for a first run of 13 episodes. The premise of the series is worth quoting at some length:

An unscrupulous developer buying up properties in Omaha is foreclosing on the rundown local Youth Center. Its last four members are cleaning out the attic when they find a box of old sports memorabilia—including, among other rare and valuable items. They put everything up for bid on an online auction service—and make millions! After they pay off the mortgage on the center, the ‘secret millionaires’ ask local celebrity Warren Buffett for advice on how to invest the money.

With Warren’s help, the four kids meet secretly to decide what local companies and businesses to invest in. Each week, Warren guides them to discovering new aspects of his investment philosophy, by using the Socratic Method to help them put his rules into practice, and helps them learn sound financial management skills—like avoiding debt! At the same time, the kids become involved in adventures as they deal with dishonest owners, corrupt accountants, security guards, corporate raiders, crooked politicians, and, of course, the unscrupulous developer.

Commentary on the project tended to focus mostly on the amusing notion of turning the frumpy Warren Buffett into an animation hero (it should however be noted that there exists a cartoon biography of Buffett, and that this sold well in Japan, so the stretch isn’t that great). More interesting here is the fact that the premise was presented without a hint of irony, and that the implicit assumption in it is that (a) children can relate to becoming millionaires, (b) children can be made interested in how to invest in companies, and (c) this makes good edutainment. When it comes to the first point, this is obviously not the first time wealthy children have been made cartoon heroes. Richie Rich, ‘The Richest Kid in the World’, had his own comic book from the 1950s (he debuted in a Little Dot-comic in 1953) and an animated series in the 1980s. And while Richie was a good guy, cartoons have always had nasty little rich boys and girls in them, foils put in to explicate the moral implications of wealth without responsibility. What is special about the secret millionaires, however, is that they are presented as empowered by wealth and also active in the management thereof.

The latter points, regarding the potential interest and educational value of the program, are slightly more difficult to disentangle. One reading of the premise would suggest that no actual children were consulted when developing this project. Rather, it seems like a heavy-handed attempt to position a product so that concerned parents will buy the DVDs, hoping to both impart economic acumen and entertain the kids. At the same time, the concept might be understood as a perverted kind of realism, a tip of the hat to the fact that corporate raiders and scurrilous accountants are far more likely threats in today’s society than the

mad scientists and militia leaders, and that financial skills may be a more potent weapon than collaborative efforts or friendship. We could thus (again) read this in a manner reminiscent of how Žižek (1991, 1992) tends to analyze popular culture, that is not merely as superficial trivialities, but as a staging of underlying traumas in the social unconscious. While the surface notion of a TV series where the animated avatar of a real investment Tycoon gives 'Socratic' lessons in fiscal responsibility and financial moves could be understood as a superficial attempt to naturalize the existing economic order, the unconscious subtext of it could be read as a critique of the same, in the same manner that Žižek shows how the omnipresence of conspiracy theories in Hollywood movies can be understood as attempts to handle a paranoid streak in the postmodern subject. The program is in effect showing kids that they live in a society where cash is king, where money is the most important thing of all, and where corruption and unethical dealings are rampant. This is further enhanced by the fact that the 'real' Buffett now appears as a cartoon character, emphasizing the virtuality and the fundamental irreality of today's money markets. In late capitalism, financial skill becomes a weapon, accountants wield power, and the 'big players' exist in an altogether different world, where breaking a major currency or doing a multibillion deal is 'normal'. The cartoon might in fact teach children much more than it tries to, assuming that children are not merely receptors of information and propaganda and can read between the lines. Where Bugs Bunny cartoons at best managed to make hunters look foolish (through the character of Elmer Fudd), the Secret Millionaire's Club plays out a whole host of dramas that can be transferred into how children look at the world around them. Suddenly, the accounting class isn't quite as innocent as previously imagined. Bank managers are no longer just old men, but potential villains. The business pages, where Buffett is prominently displayed, whisper 'Here be monsters...'

Yet again, children's culture can show us a much more complex picture than might at first be evident. My contention, thus, is that we need to pay the same attention to this assumedly simple form of culture than we usually do, and that in order to fully comprehend it we need to be as subtle (or subtler) in our readings as when analyzing other forms of popular culture. Just stating that children are subjected to forms of culture that try to naturalize and normalize an ideological state is not enough, as this completely disallows any form of children's agency, in the face of how children have always appropriated culture for their own usages. The great game of business can be played on many levels, including that of the children. But is it the same game? Or something much more hybrid, mutated, adapted?

## Childs play and kids management

What I have tried to show throughout this text is that there is a dialectic of sorts at play when we talk about children and management, and that any analysis of this field risks getting caught up in one of three traps: one, the fallacy of perfect

transmission; two, the fallacy of ascribed resistance; three, the adult-centric fallacy.

I started this text by pointing out that children are subjected to management discourses and ideas at an early age, and that this is often ignored when talking about how we internalize management as a discursive field. Children's culture contains a wide range of imagery and cultural artifacts that communicate ideas about management, business and the economy, and I have tried to highlight some of them in this text. A proto-fallacy that comes before the three traps I outline above would be to ignore this, and assume that there is no such thing as a 'management for children'.

Most people will however agree to there being such a field if one points it out to them, but the interpretation of this will vary widely. A common reaction and part of the public discourse is that this is an atrocity, that children should not have their lifeworld sullied with such things and so on. At the root of this reaction is the fallacy of perfect transmission. We often implicitly assume that children are *tabula rasa*, and that the imagery of management will imprint itself upon them with an indoctrinating force that can only be defeated through adult action. My contention in this text has been that this is a simplified view, and that children can well be capable of reading and adapting in a more complex way than we often assume – and that this should be researched further.

This does however invite the second fallacy, namely that children are not affected or that they are capable of creating 'resistance' through play and appropriation of the imagery and discourses they are subjected to. Even though we know that play can function in such a way, it is important not to ascribe too much to such potential counter-agency. Children are affected, and just like adults their capacity to handle the onslaught of discursive regimes is limited, and some would say that it is far less developed than the similar faculties in adults. What we can state is that it is different, and that the ideological constructions that children form in the field between management as cultural colonization and play as resistance are a cultural field unto themselves.

This leads us to the third fallacy, namely the tendency to project our adult views and preoccupations onto the world of children, assuming our view of the world to be a template that can be transferred directly onto the kids. My main contention in this chapter is that children have cultural forms of their own, and while it is true that material culture and discourses from the adult world of management are fodder for these and form them, this does not mean that the understandings of children can be reduced to rudimentary forms of adult understandings. Instead, we should study the lifeworlds of children as spaces where novel and idiosyncratic understandings of, for example, management are formed, and study these as cultural forms unto themselves.

In other words, this text could be understood as outlining a research agenda for studying management in the everyday life of children, but with a focus on what children do to management, not the other way around. Now, will somebody please think of the children?

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