

ORGANISATION & COMPLEXITY

ORGANISATION & COMPLEXITY

Using Complexity Science to
Theorise Organisational Aliveness

JACCO VAN UDEN

*Organisation and Complexity: Using Complexity Science to Theorise
Organisational Aliveness*

Copyright © 2004 Jacco van Uden

All rights reserved. No part of the publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the proprietor.

ISBN: 1-58112-222-5

DISSERTATION.COM



Boca Raton, Florida
USA • 2004

For Pheona

Contents

Introduction 11

1.	The Organisation as Tool	15
	INTRODUCTION	15
	FOOTBALL	16
	Football in the Netherlands	17
	Vitesse	19
	About this chapter	20
	VITESSE: MAS QUE UN CLUB	20
	Football redefined	21
	THE DISNEY WAY	23
	Disneyfication	25
	THE VITESSE WAY	26
	At Home in the Gelredome	27
	THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE VITESSE EXPERIENCE	28
	Merchandise	29
	Vitesse Kids Club	30
	Business Club Vitesse-Gelredome	31
	THE VITESSE WAY: PROFITABLE BUT DEMANDING	32
	Selling Total Fun: Prospects and Problems	33
	Relationship with Players and Other Employees	34
	Relationships with Fans	36
	Relationship with the Media	39
	A Summary of the Vitesse Way	41
	VITESSE IS AALBERS	42
	THE ORGANISATION OF VITESSE	44
	Organisations: Lives of their Own	46

2.	On the Relation Between Complexity Theory and Organisation	49
	INTRODUCTION	49
	THE GRAND COMPLEXITY PROJECT	51
	The Ideal of a Common Language	52
	Cybernetics and the Grand Complexity Project	53
	PROBLEMS WITH THE WAR ON FADDISM	55
	A Variety of Theories of Complexity	56
	PROBLEMS WITH THE WAR ON FADDISM (CONTINUED)	64
	No Consensus	65
	No All-or-Nothing	66
	No Rigour	66
	Metaphors Gone Literal	67
	COMPLEXITY AND ORGANISATION	71
3.	Organisational Aliveness: a Systems Perspective	75
	INTRODUCTION	75
	Systems Thinking in Organisation Theory	76
	FROM TOOLS TO SYSTEMS	79
	Introducing Complexity	81
	From Master to Element	82
	Perpetuating Patterns: How Systems Maintain Themselves	84
	A LIFE OF ITS OWN	86
	The Official Vitesse Story or Why The Past Doesn't Matter	87
	Individual Memories or Why The Past Matters	88
	Organisational Memories or Why The Past Matters	89
	NORMAL SYSTEMS THINKING, COMPLEX SYSTEMS THINKING	93
	Better Organisations Through Complexity	94
	Issues with Systems Thinking	96
4.	Rethinking the Vitesse Organisation	99
	VITESSE AND NUON	99
	A Carefully Staged Coup	100
	Towards a Different Understanding of the Situation	102
	Aalbers and Swelheim	103
	Changes at Nuon, Changes at Vitesse	105
	SHAPING THE VITESSE ORGANISATION	108
	THE VITESSE ORGANISATION AS AN EMERGENT PHENOMENON	111
	Normalising the Relationship between Aalbers and Vitesse	113
	THE POTENTIAL ORGANISATION	116

5.	Organisational Aliveness: Seeing Organisations as Emergent Phenomena	121
	INTRODUCTION	121
	KAUFFMAN AND THE LAWS OF COMPLEXITY	122
	THE DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION OF ORGANISATION	124
	COMPARING COMPLEXITY WITH POSTMODERNISM	126
	The Importance of the Remainder	127
	REVISITING EMERGENT PHENOMENA	130
	A Natural Organisational Order	132
	The Emerging Organisation	134
	How Emergent Phenomena Change the Setting	135
	ORGANISATIONS: LIVES OF THEIR OWN	137
	In summary	139
6.	Conclusions	141
	Taming Complexity	142
	Lives of Their Own	144
	Concluding Remarks	146
	Notes	148
	Bibliography	150

Introduction

The role organisations play in today's society is difficult to overestimate. Modern society is an *organised* society, meaning that every aspect of our lives is affected by organisations, one way or the other. Whether it concerns the quality of our food, our perception of conflicts in the Middle East, the infrastructure that enables us to take a walk through the park, or new ways to lodge a complaint about the government – behind it, there are organisations.

The way we think about organisations matters. Our images of organisation matter because they determine our understanding of what they are, of how they work, of what makes them tick. In this book, the focus will be on how different views of organisation lead to different interpretations of the relationship between organisation and man.

This book describes an attempt to think of organisations as *beings that live lives of their own*. The idea that organisations are living entities will be developed in contradistinction to an image of organisation that says the exact opposite, namely that organisations are lifeless objects – instruments that human beings are free to design, built, use and control. This latter view of organisation, which I will term the organisation-as-tool view, will be developed in chapter 1. In this chapter I will introduce Vitesse, a Dutch company that will be used to illustrate matters throughout this study. Vitesse is a professional football (soccer) club that according to its president needed to be transformed into a “multi-entertainment football company”. I will show that a very distinct image of organisation bubbles up from the ‘official’ report on this process of professionalisation, one in which the Vitesse organisation is presented as a tool that Vitesse president Karel Aalbers owns and uses to realise pre-formulated goals. I will argue that this instrumental understanding of organisation is not unique to Vitesse and that the idea that organisation is a derivative – organisation follows from man's ambition to get something done – is widespread. After that I will argue that when you want to develop the contrasting theory in which organisations live lives of their own, it makes sense to see what the so-called science of complexity has to offer.

In chapter 2 I will address the question of whether or not a student of organisation is entitled to make use of the ideas and concepts that complexity scientists work with. Complexity science is often understood as the science that studies the behaviour of complex systems. I will first review the arguments of authors who maintain that organisations *are* complex systems and that we therefore have every right to apply complexity science to organisation – provided that we do so carefully. I will then contend that even when we do *not* think that organisations are essentially complex systems, and complexity science thus needs to be considered

‘alien’ to organisation, there is still no need to give up on complexity. I will argue that the success of complexity science in the realm of organisation does not depend on rigorous application but will ultimately be determined by the extent to which its ideas and concepts contribute to existing organisational research programmes.

In chapter 3 I will try to develop the idea that organisations are living entities by drawing from the works of authors who treat complexity science as a sophisticated continuation of ‘normal’ systems theory. This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the history of systems thinking in organisation studies. After that I will show that when we jump from the organisation-as-tool view as developed in chapter 1 to an organisation-as-system perspective, the human agent moves to background and stops being able to control the organisation. According to systems theorists, the organisation *itself* interacts with the environment it finds itself in. Before I actually try to theorise organisational aliveness from a systems point of view, I will briefly reflect on the epistemological aspects of that project. I will argue that I do not believe one could really prove organisations to be alive. What we can do instead is ascribe “features of aliveness” to organisations and see whether or not these “signs of organisational life” stick, so to speak. In this chapter, I will argue that organisations may come to be regarded as living entities if we manage to convince ourselves that organisations are capable of *learning*. I will then discuss the relationship between ‘old school’ systems theory and complex systems theory. Here the question will be addressed whether complexity theory really is the New Science it is often claimed to be or if it is just “old wine in new bottles”. Chapter 3 ends with the observation that some authors reject the idea that applying complexity science to organisation necessarily requires a commitment to systems thinking. This observation is the starting point of a discussion of a theory of complexity that goes beyond the conventional systems discourse, or, at least, that pushes its limits.

In chapter 4 I will argue that a ‘non-official’ reading of the coming about of the Vitesse organisation shows that this organisation is not just the product of individual design; we need to acknowledge the influences of *many* parties, each of them ‘moulding and shaping’ the Vitesse organisation in its own particular way and for their own particular reason. At this point I will introduce Stewart and Cohen, whose theory of emergent phenomena I will rework in order to make it suitable for application in the realm of organisation. I will argue that from this point of view, the Vitesse organisation is neither the sum of its building blocks nor the outcome of a process of ‘cultivation’, i.e., the materialised effect of various parties trying to get the Vitesse organisation to be like other organisations. The conclusion that the Vitesse organisation is not open to reductionist analysis sets up chapter 5, in which I describe how it can be approached instead.

In chapter 5 I will show how the work of Stewart and Cohen can be used to flesh out the concept of organisational aliveness. Given that the value of treating organisations as emergent phenomena is best determined in relation to other understandings of organisation, I will first discuss a theory that says we need to focus on the “robust qualities” of organisations. Here, “your typical organisation” is presented as a reflection of a natural order, brought about by deep laws of nature. This theory I will then contrast with a postmodern take on matters, where organisations are believed to be discursively produced and sustained. Against this background I will show that if we apply Stewart and Cohen’s ideas to the phenomena we are interested in here, organisations come to be thought of as emerging from the “complicity” of multiple sources. I will argue that understood as an emergent phenomenon, an organisation is not only ‘more’ than that which brought it about but that it is also capable of feeding itself back into the sources from which it emerged. I will then propose to accept an organisation’s capacity “to change that from which it sprung” as a sign of organisational life.

In chapter 6 I will reflect on the my attempt to use complexity science to develop the idea that organisations live lives of their own. In this concluding chapter I will compare my attempt to link complexity to organisation with the efforts of other authors on the subject. I will show that while I like complexity science for the concepts it offers to question the primacy of human agency in our thinking about organisations, most ‘management thinkers’ hope to find that knowledge of phenomena like emergence, self-organisation or nonlinearity can make us better organisers. I will conclude by arguing that, as I see it, complexity science compels us to admit that there are serious limits to the extent to which we can design, build and control organisations.

1

The Organisation as Tool

INTRODUCTION

Some believe that 11 May 1998 marks the beginning of a new era in professional football in the Netherlands. Nearly a century after its founding, “following the example of leading clubs in other countries such as Celtic, Manchester United, Chelsea and AC Milan”, Ajax becomes the first Dutch football club with a quotation on the stock market. The prospectus makes clear that this move is but part of a more comprehensive programme, one that aims to render Ajax “a prominent party in the ongoing commercialisation and globalisation of professional football” (Ajax prospectus, 1998). Today, far more than being just a football club, Ajax is a company that is in the business of “football and activities related to football, such as sponsoring, advertising, media and merchandising” (see Euronext website).

According to those who feel that football is just another product, Ajax’s decision to manage this product professionally makes perfect sense. But the business approach to football has not been received with applause alone – far from it. Large numbers of people (working class fans and intellectuals alike) have protested against the ‘interference of business people’ and the subsequent murdering of the True Spirit of Football. In his study of the history of sports, Brailsford (1991) shows that in general, any attempt to explore the profitability of sports is likely to meet strong resistance. He points out, however, that it is not so much the money *as such* that is new to sports as is the *prominence* of it. “To suppose that sport, in the ages before industrialization, had existed in some non-material world is naive. Play never took place in an idyllic economic vacuum, and by the early nineteenth century it was more than ready to begin its steady march into a full-blown business market. As far back as the early Middle Ages sport had its financial connotations, even if they

went no further than the local alehouse keeper as he felt a warm glow at the approach of the annual football match and its carousing players. His successors had become sport promoters in their own right by the seventeenth century, when the Halifax publicans were mounting foot-races ‘to gather the country to drink their ale’” (Brailsford, 1991: 54).

In this chapter I will describe the transformation of a Dutch football club that has wholeheartedly accepted the ‘challenge’ of professionalisation/commercialisation: Vitesse. In the following, as an introduction to Vitesse, I will briefly discuss the history of football, the process of football becoming a sport, the development of organised football in the Netherlands, and the (still) uncomfortable marriage between football and commerce.

FOOTBALL

Football as we know it today was not invented as such but rather evolved into its present form. There is no straightforward answer to the question of exactly what or where football emerged from. In his comprehensive study of the development of professional football in the Netherlands, Miermans (1955) not only shows that football gradually ‘liberated’ itself from a mixture of general ball games, but he also points out that different studies have found the roots of football to lie in different countries. From a study of the British situation in particular, Miermans concludes that pre-modern football matches were uproarious events where muzzy young men from the lower social classes – unhindered by rules regarding playing time, number of participants or ways of preventing opponents from scoring – would battle one another to gain honour and respect. The rough nature of the game motivated regulators to ban football from the cities and by the end of the eighteenth century, football had become a mainly rural pastime (Miermans, 1955: 54).

In the 1830s, students of British public schools rediscovered football. Their teachers, rather than simply forbidding it, tried to ‘tame’ the game by regulating it. In its new form, football well-fitted pedagogical programmes that aimed to convert young boys into “Christian Gentlemen” (Miermans, 1955: 55). Since football was still a largely intra-school activity at that time, different schools produced different rules. This multiplicity of rules became a problem when students finished school and founded football clubs that enabled them to continue to play their beloved game. When these Old Boys tried to bring uniformity to the large numbers of rules available it became clear that the locally derived rules could not be consolidated into a single, coherent scheme. *Two* sorts of football emerged that were then defined as different sports altogether: football and rugby (modelled after the kind of ‘football’ that was played at Rugby School).

Football in the Netherlands

In the 1880s, English football began to spread across the continents. Enabled by improved means of travelling, large numbers of Brits (temporarily) moved abroad, introducing their sports to the locals. In that process, thousands of British students, businessmen, workers and military men familiarized the Dutch with football, cricket, tennis and hockey. In addition, Dutch students who had studied in the United Kingdom returned to their home country with a passion for sports and persuaded their friends to join them in their games. Miermans (1955: 76) stresses that it were not just physical activities that got imported but also, and probably even more important, what sports *represented*, namely the “typical English mentality”. Sports stood for something bigger. In a very real sense, the sporting ground was to be understood as an ideal micro-world and in their daily lives also, players were expected to live by the rules of the game. That is, in one’s day to day business too, one should “be a sport” and subscribe to the principles of “fair play”: free competition, honesty and equal chances for everyone (Hirn in Miermans, 1955: 35).

Embracing the idea behind sport as much as the game itself, boys from well-off Dutch families were unable to keep football to themselves. The liberal assumptions underlying the concept of sportsmanship – “there are no social positions on the playing field” – forced the elite to promote sports among the lower social classes, and (financially) support the latter in their founding of working class sports clubs. Catalysed by a series of mutually reinforcing developments in society, football popularised rapidly. The standard of living was improving and the working man now had both the money and time to play football. The growing popularity of football resulted in a dense network of clubs. This lowered traveling costs for players, thus making football increasingly accessible to people from the lower social classes (Miermans, 1955: 105-119). Because of the growing number of working class football players, the upper social classes began to lose their grip on the character of the game. When football was still a gentleman’s sport, friends would gather to have a good time and play for the sheer joy of it. With little motivation to actually *win* the game, fair play and overall camaraderie could flourish. Popularisation put this sportive nature of football under pressure. The ‘new’ sportsmen played against strangers, the competitive aspect of the game regained importance, and the working man’s rowdy disposition came to be reflected in how football was played. Consequently, the upper classes withdrew from football and concentrated on hockey, tennis and rugby – sports that they believed still carried within them the ideals of true sportsmanship¹ (Miermans, 1955: 122-54).

In the new situation, there was more to sportive success than just good fun or prestige. Various parties financially benefited from winning football teams: there was gate-money for the club owner, there were pubs that benefited from large crowds of thirsty supporters, there were sponsors that reaped the fruits of

‘popularity by association’, etcetera (Miermans, 1955: 124, 159). Naturally, the players themselves did not fail to notice that football had become an industry in its own right and began asking for remunerations. The preservers of the ‘purity’ of sports strongly objected to this trend. In 1909, the Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB) states it “disapproves of [professional football], considers it harmful to the sport and the people, and will protest against it by all means necessary” (in Miermans, 1955: 149). The KNVB rejected professionalism because monetary temptations were expected to soil the minds of the players, inevitably leading to a situation in which the key features of sport would be compromised; football had to be understood as non-commercial in its very nature and professionalism would leave football just another commercial activity (Stokvis, 1979: 30). The everyday practice of football was nothing like the ideal situation pictured by the football association. In 1951 a KNVB official asserts that in the higher football divisions, “true amateurism” had become a “bombastic word, a futile thing”. He advises the football association to come to terms with reality but his proposal to reconsider the “hypocritical” malediction of professional football is rejected². The repercussions of the KNVB’s ban on professionalism were considerable: high salaries in countries that *did* allow for professional football had attracted some of the best Dutch players, causing the quality of domestic football to drop dramatically. Moreover, because the KNVB denied players who had ‘betrayed’ their country the opportunity to play in the national squad, the Netherlands were of no importance in the world of international football. Eventually, the KNVB standpoint collapsed under the demand to ‘loosen up’. In 1954, by majority of votes, the association formally legitimised (semi)professional football.

The founding of a professional football league did not mean that from that moment onwards football and money were considered natural partners. In their study of the history of professional football in the Netherlands, Verkammen and Vermeer (1994) point out that regrets over the loss of (the idea of) unperverted, non-commercial football have not abated with the retreat of the elite. Already in its first season, the Dutch professional football league faced a bribery scandal and in the years to follow there were recurring disputes over salaries, transfers, broadcasting rights, shirt sponsoring, mergers, and so on.

Today, sports and commerce still do not go together very well. Knowing perfectly well that football *is* business, we nevertheless act shocked when we hear two secretly videotaped Newcastle United directors ridicule fans for purchasing replica team shirts, the manufacturing costs of which are only a fraction of the £50 retail price. The very thought that there is financial side to football is only bearable, it seems, as long as the parties involved keep their business to themselves. In the Netherlands, Vitesse was one of the first clubs to radically break with this delicate understanding of the relationship between commerce and football.

Vitesse

Founded in 1892 in Arnhem, Vitesse was everything you expected a sports club to be: a social circle of boys from the higher social classes playing games of cricket and, later, football. Vitesse was one of the first Dutch football clubs to 'go professional' but the performance of its team was all but convincing. It was not until 1971 that Vitesse made it to the *Eredivisie* (highest division), only to be relegated by the end of the season. In the following years, Vitesse became known as a rather mediocre football club that hops between the Eredivisie and the *Eerste Divisie* (second highest division). But Vitesse was not just doing poorly on the field: on the whole, things were not going very well. The appointment of a new president would change things for the better.

Local businessman Karel Aalbers decided to put an end to the misery Vitesse is in. In a documentary on the transformation of Vitesse, Aalbers describes³ the situation as follows: "prior to my arrival, this club had gone from one deception to the other. As a consequence, there were no more than five or six hundred visitors. Vitesse was a pitiful club, a club with lots of problems, at war with nearly everything and everyone. There was nothing here, no scouting, no youth teams, nothing. The good part about all this was that from there, the only way was up. And that is where we decided we would go, basically" (Aalbers in *Werken aan Werk*, 1998). The Vitesse website summarises the metamorphosis as follows. "Under the leadership of Karel Aalbers, a new executive committee was formed that, starting in 1985, introduced a separation between professional and amateur players ... Since the introduction of the new structure in 1985, the appointment of a new executive committee and the implementation of turn-around management (the rescue operation following Vitesse's threatened bankruptcy), the continuity of policy is crystal clear. Karel Aalbers continues to be chairman of Vitesse and others from the original executive committee are still working for the club. This continuity has also reaped benefits on the pitch. Following promotion in 1989, the club continued to finish among the first five teams ... Last season, with fourth-place in the rankings, the team again qualified for European football competition. Shortly after its appointment, the new executive committee developed a policy that viewed the Nieuw Monnikenhuize stadium as inadequate to meet Vitesse's objectives. Although sporting success was one objective, there were others. Vitesse had to become a club that, increasingly, could get people to commit themselves to the team. 'Vitesse for All and All for Vitesse' is a free translation of the Dutch club motto, 'Vitesse is van ons allemaal'. Increasingly, Vitesse was playing a key role in the social lives of people. The club needed an ultramodern accommodation. In 1989, the first concrete plans were presented for a modern, multifunctional, secure, orderly and – especially – hospitable stadium. Gelredome – the embodiment of Vitesse's vision, its football vision – opened its doors on 25 March 1998 during the first match of the season against NAC (4-1)".

Vitesse president Karel Aalbers wholeheartedly embraced the idea that football is business. And quite successfully so: in 1999, Vitesse had a budget of almost € 27 million (compared to little over € 360,000 in 1985), it had 400 sponsors (instead of 10), it employed a full-time, ‘non-players’ staff of 75 (none in 1985) and sold 23,000 season tickets (versus 200). However, in Arnhem also the revolutionary did not survive his revolution and on 15 February 2000, in spite of the apparent success of *Vitesse reinvented*, “Karel the Emperor” was forced to resign as president.

About this chapter

In this chapter, I will reflect on Vitesse’s programme of professionalisation. After a brief introduction to Vitesse’s new self-image, I will show that in many ways, Vitesse can be said to have taken a *Disney approach* to its business. Under the Vitesse Way, the club stopped selling ‘football per se’ and aimed to deliver a comprehensive experience. After a discussion of some of the products Vitesse was able to offer when it re-identified itself as a “multi-entertainment football company”, I’ll address the organisational implications of this move. I will argue that a very distinct image of organisation emerges from Vitesse’s report on the transformation of *today’s Vitesse* into the *Vitesse of Tomorrow* and the role Aalbers played in that process. In what I will call the Official Vitesse Story, the Vitesse organisation is understood as an instrument that Aalbers uses in order to realise Vitesse’s mission statement. It is this organisation-as-tool view that I want to challenge in this study. My ambition is to develop the idea that organisations are not lifeless instruments but instead *live lives of their own*. At the closing of this chapter I will explain why I believe that ideas and concepts from the so-called sciences of complexity can lend a helping hand in this process.

VITESSE: MAS QUE UN CLUB

In the brochure *Gelredome: a vision realised, an innovation by Vitesse professional football foundation*, Aalbers explains what Vitesse tries to achieve. “When it comes to our performance on the pitch, I would put it like this – we will be happy if, in a few years time, Vitesse is seen by the Dutch public as a club which is not automatically a non-starter for the Dutch title. Of course, one day we want to be the champions – I think that you have to have that ambition if you are playing at the top. Our aim is to compete for the title in the role of dangerous outsider. We will never be an Ajax, but we must get a step closer. From such a position, you can also play on the European stage. There is room for four top Dutch clubs at European level. Vitesse wants to be one of them” (Vitesse, 1998: 84). Elsewhere, Aalbers points out that Vitesse does not merely want to do well on the field. The club has “social ambitions” also. “We constantly monitor the market and we found that

today's society is searching for things to identify with ... Society individualises rapidly. Consequently, there is a growing need for shared experience. The success of a pop band does not depend on the quality of its songs only. It is the identification with a way of life or attitude. The same applies to football clubs. Football is no longer a minor detail of life. We are an important aspect of society. We do not just want to win the championship, although we do everything to achieve that. The ultimate goal is to make a substantial contribution to society" (Aalbers in Dutch football magazine *Voetbal International*, 1998, week 24). The Vitesse president describes that contribution as follows. "At birth, you become a member of the Vitesse-family, for which you get something in return. Vitesse needs to become part of you, it must become something sacred. To be part of something goes much further than winning or losing. This may sound a bit idealistic, but when I try to picture Vitesse in the next century, I see a value added to society" (Aalbers in regional Dutch newspaper *De Gelderlander*, 2 January 1999).

Football redefined

Aalbers' reinterpretation of 'the business of Vitesse' has far-reaching consequences for how the club is to go about. As Aalbers sees it, Vitesse will never achieve what it wants to achieve if it hangs on to a traditional view of how to run a football club. Given that "Vitesse does not have a bulging trophy cabinet, huge bank account or national following", it needs to think and act *differently*. Aalbers puts it as follows. "One can sit and moan about the changes that currently take place in professional football⁴, but we anticipated this situation. And if you do exactly that, you will find that today's problems are tomorrow's opportunities. The times are changing and that's advantageous to Vitesse. The football clubs that one sees as 'the top' because of their rich traditions cannot afford to take anything for granted anymore. Today it is all about quality of management. Everything that you see on the field is a result of policy. Vitesse and the [Gelredome] currently employ a full time staff of seventy people, all of whom are focussed one thing only: the future. We find ourselves in an ongoing process of market research and we constantly inform ourselves about developments around the world. Even now, knowing that we're sold out for next season, we do not rest on our laurels. Recently, I visited Leeds United and Chelsea Village. I have been invited by the NBA to learn about its marketing. We are always concerned with the future, and everything needs to be founded on a scientific basis. There is no royal road to success" (in *Voetbal International*, 1998, week 24). Perhaps the Gelredome stadium illustrates best what the 'New Vitesse' stands for. "Monnikenhuize, our old stadium, had great nostalgic value. But we couldn't do anything else with it. It did not give us the opportunity to attract and keep new people. The supporters we are now looking for wouldn't even dream of watching a match under such miserable conditions. But the Gelredome is an experience in itself. It is clean, friendly, safe, attractive, state of the art. You can easily get something to eat and drink, and there is something of everything to do. A completely different

proposition. Of course, a Vitesse football match is still a football match, but the context has been enormously upgraded. That, coupled with the fact that football has, for a long time, been no longer the exclusive domain of men, ensures that the size of and profile of crowds at Vitesse matches will change considerably. That is not just a vain hope – it is a fact” (Aalbers in Vitesse, 1998: 84-85).

Miermans (1954: 165) argues that already at the dawn of the twentieth century, when the popularisation of football really took off, football attracted spectators who were primarily interested in being able to claim that they too “were there”. Vitesse can be said to have capitalised on this phenomenon by ‘turning context into content’: the stuff that used to be regarded as more or less peripheral has been made a key feature of the product offer. One of the Vitesse managers I interviewed, proposed seeing Vitesse as a “*football company +*”, meaning that while the football match itself remains the core activity, from a commercial point of view, the setting in which the event takes place is equally interesting. One could argue that by offering ‘the very excitement of experiencing the whole thing’ rather than just ninety minutes of football, Vitesse changed its business proposition from offering *sports* to selling *spectacle*, as defined by Barthes. Roland Barthes distinguishes between boxing matches (sports events) on the one hand and stage-managed wrestling games (spectacles) on the other. “A boxing-match is a story which is constructed before the eyes of the spectator; in wrestling, on the contrary, it is each moment which is intelligible, not the passage of time. The spectator is not interested in the rise and fall of fortunes; he expects the transient image of certain passions. Wrestling therefore demands the immediate reading of the juxtaposed meanings, so that there is no need to connect them. The logical conclusion of the contest does not interest the wrestling-fan, while on the contrary a boxing-match always implies a science of the future. In other words, wrestling is the sum of spectacles, of which no single one is a function: each moment imposes the total knowledge of a passion which rises erect and alone, without ever extending to the crowning moment of a result” (Barthes, 1972). Similarly, the Vitesse fan is expected to appreciate every aspect of what is presented to him or her in the light of the total proposition: the (outcome of the) football match is an important feature of why one likes Vitesse, but it does not determine that appreciation fully. Even when Vitesse is defeated, the fan should still be able to have a pleasant time. “Of course, a football club is largely dependent on the performance on the field. That will always be the case. But the more you manage to make people loyal to the club, the less you depend on results. Vitesse wants to be more than just a traditional football club, I see Vitesse as a way of bringing people together. Sporting success is a very important part of this, which is why our ambitions are so high. But that is not all. If Vitesse becomes an important factor in people’s lives, that’s another story. Vitesse must be worth experiencing, and the atmosphere must be right. You must feel that you really belong there, so the club’s accommodation must be such that you feel comfortable and at home. If you get all these things right, your performance on the

pitch is still important, but no longer a matter of life and death” (Aalbers in Vitesse, 1998: 84).

The Vitesse Way has clearly been inspired by other companies in the spectacle industry. It seems that Vitesse can justly be ‘accused’ of having taken a *Disney approach* to football⁵. In the following, I will briefly describe the main features of the Disney philosophy. The purpose of this section is to create a background for a more detailed discussion of the Vitesse Way.

THE DISNEY WAY

In its very essence, Disney corporation is in the business of offering harmless entertainment for the mass: “as a consumer-driven location it is frequently beholden to the lowest common denominator. Disney strives to cater to the most number of people without being offensive or threatening” (Borrie, 1999). The Disney theme parks in particular embody the spirit of this proposition. These parks are all “about mild contentment and the over arching reassurance that there is an order governing the disposition of things”, as Marling (1997: 83) phrases it. Disneyland is the place where visitors guests are assured that it’s a happy, small world after all. Fred Beckenstein, senior vice-president of Euro-Disneyland Imagineering: “the whole idea is escape from reality into a place where you can simply have fun. Life is full of problems, but it is our job to stop harsh reality intruding” (Beckenstein in *Organise!*, 1999).

Disney’s picture perfect world largely revolves around nostalgia. Beckenstein explains that his company is “trying to design what people think they remember about what existed”. The company’s ambition to enable its customers to relive their idealised childhood has materialised in an “architecture of reassurance”. Disney prefers rounded intersections over ninety degree corners because the former are perceived as less rigid, less threatening, and therefore more conducive to a comfortable visitor experience (Koenig, 1994). “All these architectural and environmental touches, ranging from harmonious color schemes to the absence of garbage (a Main Street ‘newspaper’ was discontinued early because the discarded copies were thought to clutter the street) to the famous 5/8 building scale which ‘made the street a toy,’ as Disney put it, which work together to offer an accessible landscape where Disney and visitors could feel instantly ‘at home’”(Vanderbilt, 1999). Disney also strives to restore the *moral* order its visitors want to remember. In Disneyland, the undesirable and threatening aspects of society are purged and visitors are encouraged to feel safe. Not only is dirt, crime and poverty removed, but social deviance is curtailed. Disney does not tolerate drug taking, unrestricted free speech, gang paraphernalia or behaviour, unusual religious practices or open displays of sexuality. People are not violent or sexual in Disneyland, unless that

behaviour has been officially sanctioned. For example, the daily parade down Main Street is modelled after the many celebrations of Carnival, but without the sexual undertone. The tranquillity of the park is not to be threatened, and Disney maintains the right to ask people to leave if their appearance or behaviour might be considered offensive to other guests (Koenig, 1994; Van Maanen, 1992: 10-12).

Disney believes its employees play a vitally important role in the experience that the Disneyland visitor undergoes. The handbook of the Walt Disney World College Program reminds the student that Disney is “running a business that relies on you to bring our magic to life” (see Disney Alumni website). This requires, first of all, that employees stop to think of their jobs as labour. “Employees are coached to appear as though their work is play”, Borrie (1999) writes. In Disneyland, you will therefore find *cast members* (not employees), *wearing costumes* (not uniforms), *playing their roles* (not doing their jobs) on *stage* (not out on the floor) in front of an audience of *guests* (not customers). Cast members are expected to commit themselves to a series of guidelines for Guest Service. Walt Disney World Resort business intern Kopicki (2001) explains what these guidelines look like in practice. “Seeking out guest contact means avoiding folding your arms over your chest or showing your hands in your pockets as you may appear unapproachable. Proactively means that you make compliments such as ‘That’s a great shirt you’ve got on!’ or simply informing where that Guest is from. Preservation of Magic happens when a curious parent asks ‘how’ Tinkerbell flies, you refrain from launching into an explanation of how a 90-pound girl gets costumed, then harnessed to a cable and pushed out of the castle window to fly across the sky into Tomorrowland. Instead you reply: ‘Pixie dust’” (Kopicki, 2001). Larry Lynch, Director of Business Development at the Disney Institute, points out that cast members are also “empowered” to actively arrange for magical experiences. “One example is our program called Take Five in which cast members take five minutes out of their day to proactively do something special for a guest. We call it being aggressively friendly. Our cast members look for opportunities for magic moments—those little things that happen for guests that are utter surprises. For example, a housekeeper in one of our resort hotels discovered that a guest was not feeling well so she took the time to get chicken soup from a resort restaurant and bring it back to the guest” (quoted in Emory, 2001).

Disney offers its guests more than just a time-bound experience of nostalgia, belonging, security, or comfort. Through so called “merchaintainment” Disney leads its guests to the souvenir shop, where all that Disney stands for can be wrapped and taken home as a keepsake. “Since Disney’s standing policy regarding everything is to be the very best, we were taught that we do not simply ‘ring up’ guest purchases. We actively engage the guest, ask them about their day, if everything was found to be in order, if we can help with anything at all. The point is that it helps to create and build sales. Selling the ‘Disney way’ is matching the

wants and needs of the Guests with the products and services that are offered. By talking enthusiastically about our products and services, a guest can be directed to a product they might need or want, but not know about. This also aids in making cherished friends” (Kopicki, 2001).

Disneyfication

Disney probably has as many critics as it has potential guests. As Stuever (2001) sees it, “railing against all things Disney is nearly as American as a trip to Orlando. Writers deplore it. Artists mock it, and subvert its icons even in the face of desist orders from Disney’s legion of lawyers. Community activists who live near Disney’s financial and ecological lava flow delight in occasionally discombobulating the Disney machine. Scholarly analysis of the cultural, economic and psychological impact of Disney is now a ticket to tenure, one of the faster-growing branches of academia”. Disney-bashers often accuse the company of murdering spontaneity: Disney is “smile factory” (Van Maanen, 1991) where we are forced to experience what Disney wants us to experience. The Disney business, the critical argument goes, is the business of inescapable and totalising prefabricated fun: “I hate it when I feel compelled to announce in the Pirates of the Caribbean gift shop that we are really all capitalist tools supporting a media saturated culture where we cannot buy anything without having it tied in with the latest cartoon movie having [Disney President] Michael Eisner’s imprimatur. I hate it how nothing is left to chance in Disney World. I hate it that there are even signs telling the tourist where to take a picture. I hate spending any part of my vacation marveling with complete strangers about the genius of Disney crowd-control. I hate the squeaky clean staff with their professional smiles. Most of all, I hate it that my husband is forced to take me in hand and threaten dire punishment if I ruin the day for the rest of the family” (Menziez Jones, 1996).

Critique is often not limited to Disney itself. The success of the Disney Way has motivated a variety of organisations to apply the distinctive philosophy and principles to their own businesses. This process and its outcomes have been labeled the *disneyization* or *disneyfication* of society. As Vanderbilt (1999) understands it, disneyfication is “shorthand for the dreaded substitution of urban reality with a sanitized and ‘Imagineered’ spectacle – an opiate for the middle-class suburban masses”. In a Disneyfied society, the authentic, the unguided and the sudden have made way for a homogenised culture of slavish consumption. “The ‘Disneyfication’ of our cities reflects a larger societal change towards the ‘commodification’ and ‘passportisation’ of experience. Today, people buy and collect ‘leisure experiences’ the same way they do consumer goods” (Hannigan, 1998: 33). According to Kellner, the Disney approach has been particularly ‘successful’ in the world of professional sports. “It appears that professional sports, a paradigm of the spectacle, can no longer be played without the accompaniment of cheerleaders, giant mascots who