A Story for our Times: Byham’s and Cox’s HeroZ

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Business novels are a form of didactic literature. The Zapp! ‘empowerment’ books by W.C. Byham and Jeff Cox are examples of this genre. They are also examples of a purportedly more humanistic management tradition. The particular business solutions which they offer are premised on the assumption that a significant part of who we are is derived from our work, and that to improve our work (necessitating greater commitment from us, whilst we also derive greater meaning from our work) is therefore to improve and enrich our individual lives. But to what extent are they likely to succeed in these humanistic aims? By way of example, I consider how Byham’s and Cox’s fable HeroZ, especially insofar as it self-consciously situates itself within the fairy tale genre, nevertheless fails to situate and fully reflect upon its own contexts and especially ideological limits of writing. Perhaps typical of contemporary (and ultimately either management inspired, appropriated or consistent) approaches to life in general, the normative ‘solution’ which HeroZ offers ultimately fails to provide a way of living in which human beings can fully be the beings we are.

Let’s consider a story. Specifically, let’s consider a particular type of story, as represented by the 1994 publication of W.C. Byham’s and Jeff Cox’s business novel, qua management fable, HeroZ. HeroZ, like all offerings from the business novel genre, provides a fictional story which, in a hopefully entertaining way, purports to offer practical solutions on how best to manage businesses. Thematically, HeroZ forms part of Byham’s and Cox’s patented Zapp! series of books. Whilst published by Ballantine in the US, the Zapp! series, which also includes adaptations for the education and health care professions, are available through

1 I am grateful for initial reviewer comments which I received anonymously from Limina, in submitting a first draft of this paper for consideration. I am particularly grateful for the insights those reviewers provided, in offering multiply different perspectives on how the eponymous book of this paper can be read and interpreted, as well as what questions it seems to raise. Of course, in reading any text, many such perspectives are thereby possible. But what can remain hidden, and thereby explicitly unrecognised, is the fact that there could not be any single reading (such as the one which follows) except to the extent that it arises in dialogue with those multiple and distinct voices.

2 W.C. Byham and Jeff Cox, HeroZ: Empower Yourself, Your Coworkers, Your Company, Fawcett Columbine/Ballantine Publishing, New York, 1994. For those who are interested, the journal Canadian Business, Toronto, 1994, vol.67, no.8, p.90 f., contained a quite nice review which provides one indication of how the book was received by the business world. Whilst generally favourable, it recognised that advancing employee empowerment as a ‘heroic’ ideal is essentially just hyperbole, and included a final recommendation in this context that we should preserve the meaning of what constitutes genuine heroes – e.g. as demonstrated for the reviewer by the heroism of those enduring the last World War (ibid).


4 I refer to the United States of America (USA) throughout as simply the ‘US’. One reason I do so is just simple preference. However, by dropping the geographical reference to ‘America’ I also hope to highlight the transnational character of those ways of life which the USA has tended to increasingly market and export to other countries since the emergence of US industrial power last century (that is, from the pioneering days of Henry Ford and others at the start of the century, to the dominance of the US military-industrial complex post World War II).
Byham’s company Development Dimensions International, ‘which specializes in aligning client’s people strategies with their business strategies’⁵. It is in this context as a management product that Byham’s company also directly sells its other products and services to interested clients. It is also in this context that the Zapp! books can be considered part of that management consulting industry which, since at least Peter’s and Waterman’s hugely successful In Search of Excellence⁶ (1982), has tended to bypass academia almost entirely, in marketing their views to organisational, and especially middle, managers⁷.

However, whilst recognising this focus, it is also interesting to note that HeroZ has appeared in at least some expressly educational curricula⁸. The US Wilmington University College of Education has offered a course in ‘Leadership Dynamics and Data-Driven Decision Making’ which includes HeroZ (as well as the 1992 Zapp! in Education) amongst its recommended representative texts and supporting resources. A youth apprenticeship program serving at-risk students, partnered in the US between a local Southern Wisconsin company (Generac Portable Products), the Watertown Unified School District and the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, is also identified as having included HeroZ as part of its English studies. What makes HeroZ particularly apposite for these uses is that, in addition to its focus on practical business application, it (like the other Zapp! books) concerns the practice of employee ‘empowerment’. That is, it concerns those management practices which supposedly engender employees both taking and being allowed to take responsibility for their own work, and the benefits this purportedly has for both businesses and individuals alike. In this respect, both HeroZ and the other Zapp! books form part of a purportedly more humanistic management tradition, which has its most prominent, twentieth century origin with Elton Mayo and the human relations school of management⁹.

In their advocacy of this supposedly more humanistic form of management, both the original Zapp! book and HeroZ employ a similar narrative construction (broadly, that the business is failing and needs to be revived via employee empowerment), as well as recognisable character types (including distinct worker and management ‘heroes’). Both also incorporate fantastic or fabulous elements. Zapp! is set in an alternate world of the near future, of dimension-breaching machinery and, as it finally eventuates, would-be spacecraft. HeroZ is set in a fantasy realm of dragons, castles and knights. Unlike Zapp!, which considers how management can empower their employees to be more motivated and engaged in their work, HeroZ is concerned with how employees both can, and in some sense should, empower themselves. Whilst both thematically and chronologically a sequel to Zapp!, HeroZ itself presents as a complete and separate narrative.

My aim in this paper is to consider what the story of HeroZ has to ‘say’ in these (i.e. its own) terms, that is, as the supposedly complete and separate narrative which it presents itself. However, I also want to suggest that this has something very pertinent to say both to and about our current times. Significantly, this includes some closer questioning of what HeroZ et al. unquestionably presume to be ‘goods’, or even a good life per se. These considerations, it must be admitted, are not new ¹⁰. Others have said and considered, in at least

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⁵Byham and Cox, Zapp!, author endotes.
⁸The following two examples were obtained from a simple Google search. The ‘hit’ for the first example is: www.wilmu.edu/courses/syllabipdf/EDD7202_Generic.pdf. The information for the second example was obtained from an article in an on-line journal for the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English Language Arts, at: www.uwrf.edu/wej/Spring 2000.pdf. The article in question is Julie Monroe, ‘Authentic Curriculum’, The Wisconsin English Journal, vol.42, no.1, Spring 2000, pp.58. There were no obvious ‘hits’ from a search limited to Australian websites.
⁹There are numerous references for this. For example, Stewart offers a highly entertaining summary and critique of Mayo’s contributions at Stewart pp.97–121 and pp.127–138. Charles Perrow also contains some analysis of Mayo and the human relations movement more generally, in his classic Complex Organizations (Perrow, Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay, Random House, New York, 1986 [3rd edition]).
¹⁰Not least, it should be obvious that there have been, and continue to be, many different characterisations of what does or should constitute a ‘good’ life. To name but a few, these include the Epicurean counsel to engage with
some form, what we will shortly consider. But a tendency of contemporary life seems to be to always forget what others have said, including what they have said in recognising this very tendency. Søren Kierkegaard would seem to have been a particularly apposite herald in this respect. For example, although his *The Present Age* extends far beyond simply recognising this tendency, the infatuation with present aims and interests at the expense of some deeper personal commitment seems intimately related to the concerns expressed in this present paper. Not least, such an infatuation seems to invite some of the dangers of anachronism, in which a blinkered focus on present aims and concerns may invite certain readings of some particular text, which a sensitivity to the historical context of its writing simply does not support. Perhaps more pertinently, it may even invite a certain ahistorical reading, in which present contexts and understandings are read as being present (sic) in *every* age. On just this basis alone, we would seem warranted, albeit somewhat paradoxically and with not a little irony, in thinking ever anew these considerations.

Consistent with what has already been noted above, *HeroZ*, like all stories, has its own particular narrative construction which it shares to some degree with other stories (not least, *Zapp!* in the same genre or similar genres. But more generally than this, it also has a particular and ultimately historical context. Not only is the story itself set in a particular way (with specific protagonists having to overcome specific obstacles), but it is written at a particular time in history – with particular literary traditions, social institutions, cultural norms, and other world understandings from which it can (and, to at least some degree, ultimately must) draw upon.

But *HeroZ* is also one of those stories which, like other stories in associated genres, ask us as readers to put aside to a significant extent the particular literary, social, cultural and other epistemic contexts within which they were necessarily written. These stories include the fairy tales which begin with the litany ‘Once upon a time’. In this respect, it is worth noting that it has been claimed that the biblical ‘In the beginning’ (that is, *en archē* or *in principio*) functions in much the same way that the ‘once upon a time’ does which begins all folktales. That is, ‘not merely first in a series of events but the *ground or field* in which the series takes place – not in time but beyond time’. The point is that ‘once upon a time’, together with similar introductions, does not operate to situate a story in a historically contiguous way with respect to our own time. Rather, it is to give, as brute (but thereby also contingent or even arbitrary) fact, the only setting necessary within which both the ensuing story and its essentially ahistorical ‘message’ need be read in order to be understood. Such tales invite the reader to realms, not of a particular historically situated and contiguous time, but rather to a time which is essentially no-time beyond the immediacy of the settings employed. Protagonists may have a particular inheritance which they can draw upon, and specific obstacles which they must overcome. But these settings are entirely contingent historically,

good company etc., the Aristotelian focus on civic virtues, and Judeo-Christian (et al) admonishments to live a life devoted to God. It could even be considered to include existentialist conceptions which some have attempted to derive from a more structural analysis of what characterises human existence (although *not*, it should be noted, with the blessing of their purported inspiration, Martin Heidegger). Different assumptions as to what constitutes a good life also form the basis of much critical theory, from its Marxist beginnings onwards. Such theory, of course, offers a much closer critique of many of the themes and issues I hope to briefly explore here. I would also hope that someone, somewhere, would have voiced some similar concerns on the publication of *HeroZ*, which I’ve attempted to critically analyse below (although I should note that I’m not aware of any myself).

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12This is something which analytic philosophy generally has sometimes been accused. Namely, that it has a tendency to lack an appropriate historical sensitivity to the circumstances, contexts and traditions of its own thought. Of course, such accusations are themselves historically conditioned (not least, as they pertain against particular authors and specific claims), and should not be read as a necessary indictment against any contemporary school of philosophical thought. Most especially, it should *not* be read as suggesting that there are necessarily no pan-human (and therefore pan-historical) categories of thought or experience, or even structures of being.  
14Ibid.
and their only necessity lies in the ways they contribute to the development of both story and plot.

For fairy tales at least, this essentially timeless quality can be understood, in part, because the moral lessons derived from the tales appear to have timeless applicability. *HeroZ* itself ostensibly uses such fairy-tale story devices, opening in the following, not atypical way for such tales, claiming that ‘Once upon a time, in a magic land near you, there was a castle.’15 And as I will suggest below, apart from the sheer entertainment value of such forms, *HeroZ* uses these devices for much the same reasons in which fairy tales may be understood – namely, that the ‘moral lessons’ (or their equivalent) to be derived from their tale have a certain general applicability.16

So what are these ‘moral lessons’? And what is the narrative in which they occur? Set in a mythical realm of Lamron, the particular threat which *HeroZ* proceeds to describe is one of immortal dragons, from whom the Lamron castle knights protect the local citizenry, for a fee, using locally constructed magic dragon-banishing arrows.17 However, the ultimate threat which then shortly develops is not the dragons *per se*, but rather the waning ability of the Lamron castle to provide its dragon-banishing service whilst competing with other dragon fighting castles. The story itself ultimately aims to instruct readers on how to improve services without increasing costs, thereby staying competitive in the marketplace.

Already this seems dissimilar from your standard fairy tale. True, the story itself might generally present as ahistorical, insofar as it is set in a typically medieval inspired (but not historically contiguous) time of castles, knights and fabled dragons. However, in order to understand what the story is saying, it is impossible not to also be aware of the contemporary management issues to which it is addressed. There are even anachronistic references to help readers orient themselves to the contemporary relevance of the story. For example, when it is noted that ‘every household in Lamron kept a brass horn handy’ for warning the castle whenever a dragon threatened, the injunction to the citizen concerned is ‘to get on the horn – and then take cover and hide.’18 It doesn’t take a genius to understand the reference here to ‘horn’ as telephone. Similarly, when the responding knight requests payment for their dragon-banishing services from the citizen concerned, they ‘present a bill… and ask, “Will this be cash, check, or charge?”’19 Even the reference to ‘citizen’ (i.e. rather than peasant, serf, or other such medieval inspired roles) is, of course, particularly apposite to our contemporary political institutions, and therefore anachronistic in that context.

In other words, *HeroZ* can be regarded as belonging to the literary form of allegory, ‘in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived both to make coherent sense on the “literal,” or primary level of signification, and also to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts, and events.’20 Because of its practical instructional aims,

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16Whether this is true or not is, of course, a quite separate matter, as is the question of whether the basis for such claims to general applicability is the same as that for fairy tales. The moral lessons deriving from the latter aspire to the level of timeless (if not categorical) truths simply on the basis that they *are* such truths. The same basis could be attributed to the management ‘lessons’ of *HeroZ*, assuming that it represents psychological and social truths about how people do or even should ‘best’ behave in labour contexts. But the management techniques which are thereby advanced could also be viewed as entirely strategic and rather more disingenuous, having expediency as their sole basis. This is consistent with the view of human resource management as a form of instrumental rhetoric (e.g. see Karen Legge, *Human Resource Management: Rhetorics and Realities*, Palgrave, Basingstoke/New York, 1995 and 2005 expanded anniversary edition). However, my purpose in the first instance is to suspend such judgements and, as noted above, try and consider what *HeroZ* has to say on its own terms (i.e. in and of itself).
18ibid, p.1.
19ibid, p.2.
20M H Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (fourth edition), Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York et al., 1981, p.4. It is interesting to note that the *HeroZ* dragons may themselves be read allegorically. Consider the fact that the dragons have not only effectively created the economy (in that the Lamron and other castle-economies are based on providing dragon-banishing services to their local citizenry), but their continued presence maintains it (notwithstanding Lamron’s ultimate expansion into other kinds of markets, dragon-banishing remains the staple market for mounting that expansion). They are not only the foundation upon which the castle-economies are built, but to this extent, all the citizenry are thereby dependent on the dragons for work and meaning. However, that
it can also be regarded as belonging with other didactic literary works[^21], and in particular that specific didactic form of the fictional business novel. Significantly, the solution which *HeroZ* offers to the particular business problem of staying market-competitive is itself historically situated in the development of management thought. A simple glance at the titles of Byham’s and Cox’s other works (for example, as cited in the inside cover of *HeroZ*) will find the terms ‘empowered teams’, ‘self-directed work groups’, ‘team-based organisations’ and ‘ongoing improvement’. As already noted, *HeroZ* itself forms part of the authors’ *Zapp!* books on empowerment – a fact which is obvious, not least, from the repeated appearances of increasingly brighter flashes of lightning between cooperating workers, accompanied by the sound ‘Zapp!’[^22]. And *HeroZ* is even dedicated:

> To all of us who work for a living…who model on a daily basis the values of empowerment, continuous improvement, and dedication to customer service.[^23]

However, although such contexts feature significantly in how *HeroZ* is to be read, the purported generality of the claims thereby made is also a significant feature. In particular, the authors note that both the original *Zapp!* book and *HeroZ* are written as fables, because this form makes it possible to disregard the distracting differences between organizations and industries so that we can concentrate on the essentials.[^24] The assumption here of course is that there are such cross-organisational/industrial ‘essentials’, and that the ‘distracting differences’ are not, to the contrary, essential for understanding the management methods which may be successfully applied to those different organisations and industries.

It is also worth recognising that Byham and Cox note, more prosaically, ‘that a book written as fable would be a heck of a lot more fun to read than a book written in typical textbook fashion.’[^25] This is broadly consistent with Byham’s claim that the original *Zapp!* book was written in the style of a fable in order to communicate certain principles in an amusing and thereby engaging way, which is not only easy to understand but also challenging to the imagination.[^26] In particular, they used the fable form so that they ‘could take an abstract concept and let people visualize it in action, and in lively but meaningful terms’.[^27] Now, consistent with all didactic literature, the particular settings within which the stories occur are always secondary to the particular instruction which is being imparted. Moreover, insofar as Byham and Cox believe that they are dealing with ‘an abstract concept’, they also presumably believe that that concept (i.e. ‘Zapp!’ patented empowerment) has a certain general applicability. To this extent, the particular settings which are chosen for each of the books are, to at least some degree, therefore also arbitrary.

My purpose at this point is not to question this assumption of general, and in particular cross-organisational/industrial, applicability. Rather, it is simply to see what kind of

[^21]: For example, see Abrams, pp.42–43.
[^23]: ibid (the extract is from the dedication).
[^24]: ibid, p.xi.
[^25]: ibid, xi.
[^27]: ibid.
picture it paints of both work and us, on the initial assumption that it is true. To this extent, whilst we might remain aware of the anachronistic references which HeroZ makes (often to comic effect) to both contemporary management issues and the modern world more generally, we can largely ignore these (or, if you will, ‘bracket’ them off) to focus on the claims which Byham and Cox actually make as generally applicable to the world of work. The fairy-tale setting is relevant in this context, because whilst the working world to which it corresponds allegorically may still be historically situated, the particular claims which are made concerning that world derive their sense of general applicability, at least in part, from the ahistorical setting itself. And vice versa: the ahistorical fairy-tale setting seems apposite because Byham and Cox believe their claims to have a certain general applicability.

All this creates a certain ambivalence. For example, consider the context from which Byham and Cox themselves acknowledge that they are working:

Years ago, when the world was more in awe of technology than it is now, a number of people predicted that machines of one type or another would someday do all the work unattended and that we human beings would enjoy an Age of Leisure. Life would be one very long vacation.

Of course, this has not come to pass and will not anytime soon. But this is probably just as well. For one thing, the predictors of the Age of Leisure were a little fuzzy on exactly how we would each pay for this life-long vacation, as we would not have jobs. But even more serious is the fact that we human beings need work to a greater degree than most of us like to admit.

The truth is that work gives us not only a paycheck, but a significant piece of our sense, as individuals, of who we are. Meet a stranger and the second or third bit of information this person usually wants to know about you (after your name and where you live) is what kind of work you do. As adults in this society, our work has a big influence on our self-esteem and our notions of self-worth, as anyone without a job is only too well aware.

On the one hand, this last claim is explicitly addressed to its reader as ‘adults in this society’ (my emphasis). In using the demonstrative ‘this’, it not only assumes a particular contemporary way of life as is evident within US society, but it thereby both situates its claims with respect to that audience and presumes that readers will recognise themselves as members of that larger and necessarily historically-situated collective. It is even opposed, and thereby also situated, to what is offered as a particular contemporary, qua historical, counter-prophesy concerning that way of life (i.e. that we will all live a life of leisure). On the other hand though, it is clearly represented as simply a ‘truth’ about us as human beings per se. That is, it is presented as something which is true of us in virtue of the kind of entity we are, irrespective of the particular contexts and circumstances in which we find ourselves. Even its particular, situated relevance to us as ‘adults in this society’ is made after this general truth claim is made. In other words, its particular contemporary relevance to us is given as an example of its instantiation – not necessarily a possible condition or limit with respect to which that truth applies.

There is something particularly suspect about this presumptive truth claim. What is understood as ‘work’ in this context (and which is afforded importance by Byham and Cox) is both an activity and concept within contemporary and presumably US, or even more broadly Western, society. And both that context and therefore understanding includes what might be presumed to be historically contingent features of capitalist economic development, including specific types of property relations and modes of production. However, none of this is referenced by the authors. Instead, a general ontological claim is made concerning what is supposedly a feature of being human per se.

To understand what kind of ontological claim this is, it is important to note that (not surprisingly for a non-philosophical text) no discussion occurs as to whether this is a biologically contingent feature of our evolution as human beings, or something perhaps more.

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28Byham and Cox, HeroZ, pp.ix–x.
fundamental which constitutes a necessary condition for us being human ‘selves’ at all. Instead, the claim that ‘work’ (however understood) is important to us is presented simply as brute fact. In doing so, it becomes a condition of this particular management fable that the presumably historically conditioned value of contemporary understood ‘work’ is, to the contrary, to be understood in an essentially ahistorical and generally de-situated way. It is a brute truth which remains essentially unquestioned in the didactic lessons which HeroZ hopes to impart to its readers, whilst simultaneously providing the very reason why Byham and Cox believe those lessons to be of fundamental importance to us. However, after asserting this supposedly fundamental truth, the authors again contextualise their aims in the following way:

One of the biggest issues we presently face is not what to do with all of our leisure time, but how to create new jobs, how to make the jobs we already have more productive in terms of value delivered, and how to get the world economy growing again. This is not just an issue for politicians and economists; it is an issue in which all of us have a role to play. And it is not just a matter of jobs and paychecks; we want those jobs in the end to make our country and our world a less trouble-ridden, more prosperous, more healthy, more enjoyable place to live. That is the ultimate meaning of good work.

What seems particularly dubious is that these aims are identified as unquestioned ‘goods’, and that they follow after only a very general truth claim has been asserted that work is important to us in contributing to our sense of self. How, then, are these proclaimed goods to be understood in that context? One way of understanding the relation between the earlier, more general truth claim and these more particular claims is that this is either why or how work is important for us. In other words, it is assumed that work contributes to our sense of self because ‘we want those jobs in the end to make our country and our world a less trouble-ridden, more prosperous, more healthy, more enjoyable place to live’. However, what again remains unquestioned is how job creation and getting ‘the world economy growing again’ will exactly achieve these aims. As with the previous truth claim, this relation is simply assumed as brute fact, thereby providing a further limiting condition within which both the specific claims and more general work-world of HeroZ are to be understood.

For now though, whilst acknowledging that these are some of the parameters within which HeroZ is to be understood, let’s suspend such contexts and questions, and focus instead on the particular ways in which the worker heroes of HeroZ are afforded the opportunity to enhance their jobs to make their mythical country of Lamron ‘a less trouble-ridden, more prosperous, more healthy, more enjoyable place to live’. In other words, and as anticipated, let us try and consider what HeroZ has to say, in and of itself.

The Lesson of the Story Itself (We are All HeroZ)

As noted above, the central problem with which our heroes are confronted is the waning ability of the Lamron castle to provide its dragon-banishing service whilst competing with other dragon fighting castles. Of course, the individual circumstances of each of our heroes is presented as varying somewhat. For arrow-maker qua ‘shaft-turner’ Art Halegiver, his
particular circumstance is that he has come to hate his job, and yet needs to work in order to pay his bills. For Wendy, who is one of the ‘wand-wavers’ who add the necessary magic to the finished arrows, the decline in and high-cost of Lamron’s dragon-banishing services led to a dragon burning her parent’s house down, and to their subsequent decision to leave Lamron. For their friend Mac, his concern is more quizzical, and is aimed more directly at trying to understand why things are as they currently are, as follows:

“Well, what’s wrong with us?” asked Mac. “How come our knights don’t get there faster? How come our arrows don’t work better? Why are our prices so high? Why isn’t somebody doing something?”

What Mac asks, along with the King of Lamron, is of course the central problem of HeroZ noted above. Namely, why Lamron’s dragon-banishing services are no longer competitive. The answer to this is provided in the form of corresponding, locally instigated redresses to existing work practices, which improve efficiency, quality and ultimately productivity. Instigated by Art, this leads to him actually enjoying work again. The measures also ultimately improve service levels to such an extent that Wendy’s parents decide to move back to Lamron. In these ways, the resolution of what is effectively a business problem is presented as leading to directly personal benefits for the employees concerned.

Of course, what is of particular interest to the authors of HeroZ are the forms which these efficiency and other improvements take. Starting with Art’s, and then Wendy’s and Mac’s, improvements to their own individual work practices and work spaces, the improvements then extend to how they collaboratively work with others. Significantly, this includes ensuring that the efforts of key employees are steered away from insisting on more resources, to more affordable solutions of individual factory-floor efficiencies, inter-departmental cooperation and multi-skilling. Benefits in instigating these improvements include being able to better cope with varying differences in workload, volume and capacity between the different arrow-making departments of Lamron castle.

Initially, this requires a rejection of fundamental innovation in, and therefore unprofitable challenge to, what the business produces (i.e. dragon-banishing magic arrows). For example, Art conceives of making the arrows only half their typical size. The only problem with this is that the arrows no longer fit the knights’ bows, leading to nearly all the new half-sized arrows having to be discarded. It is only later, after a further failed idea with a blowgun prototype, when Art includes the other relevant stakeholders represented by the knights, bow-makers and techno-wizards, that his idea is able to be practically implemented via a perfected cross-bow delivery system. The particular lesson which is associated with this part of the fable seems simple: it isn’t enough to come up with fundamentally innovative ideas by yourself. They need to be able to be practically implemented, and for that you need collaboration with others and their ideas and experiences as to how they can be implemented. And it needs real-world testing for the same reason.

To further underline this point, that an innovative idea by itself is insufficient or even useless, Art is introduced to where the ghostly dreams and ideas of various techno-wizards are stored but were never implemented. The reason for this, as Art’s guide (a techno-wizard named Stan) explicitly states, is that:

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former competitive vigour. He is literally a hale-giver (in the sense of once again becoming ‘hale and hearty’) for the castle and its employees.

33 Byham and Cox, HeroZ, p.4.
34 ibid, pp.5–6.
35 ibid, p.6.
36 ibid, pp.6–7ff.
37 ibid, p.189.
38 ibid, pp.37–38.
39 ibid, pp.159–160.
“Because in each case the people who came up with these great ideas thought that was all that they needed to do,” said Stan. “They dreamed the dream. They never did much, if anything, to make the dream become reality. They thought that coming up with the idea solved the problem. So their genius and creativity never went anywhere – except here, to the Storeroom of Great Vaporous Visions.”

Taken cognately then, the lessons of HeroZ, with perhaps other similarly structured management fables, can be understood as follows. First, work generically (but understood particularly with respect to contemporary understandings of work roles) is good or even necessary because it contributes significantly to our sense of self (including self-worth). Second, there are additional benefits to work (at least within the Western understood construct), in that it contributes to making both our individual lives, and the world generally, somehow ‘better’. Third, it therefore makes sense for each of us to individually exert effort in trying to improve (in the sense of efficiency, quality and productivity) what we do when working, and thereby the work itself. Fourth, and significantly, this requires us to collaborate with each other in those individual exertions, to such an extent that individual effort and innovation without such collaboration is seen as entirely useless. And finally, fifth, and perhaps most importantly, if we do collaborate with each other in this manner, then our individual but collaboratively constrained efforts will provide us with both personal and collective benefits.

Of course, there is a world (sic) of difference between fable and actuality. Not least, few except the young (and possibly Disney creators) may ever believe that fairy tales such as HeroZ literally come true in the real world. Hence the expression, which is typically and sometimes even pejoratively opposed to that which we tend to experience in real life, of a ‘fairy tale’ ending. However, such tales often provide normative lessons for what we should or ideally do in our normal, everyday lives. And they may even provide a glimmer of hope or at least consolation, as to what should happen if, in a perfect and just world, things worked as they were ‘supposed’ to.

And even if we now move from the world of fable to the world of contemporary, market-competitive corporations and other organisations, it might be admitted that whilst few management practitioners may actually believe 100% of the claims made in the pop-management literature (e.g. that if you do ‘this’ then wealth, fame, longevity and world peace will be yours), at least some of what that literature espouses may nevertheless be seen as having both pragmatic and even normative value. Taking the apparent lessons of HeroZ and other such fables as a case in point, an expectation or even demand within institutions, for collaborative and even collaboratively constrained effort from their employees, would seem entirely reasonable in the circumstances.

For example, there is no point in a company producing something which it cannot use, or else that it can use but only at a re-tooling cost of sending that company bankrupt. Similarly, there is nothing more frustrating than being forced to use a tool (e.g. Microsoft product) which some team of ‘bright-sparks’ has taken it upon themselves to ‘improve’ beyond the capacity of many people to actually use the darned thing. But it must also be admitted that such reasonable demands nevertheless impose potential constraints on both innovation and individual innovative efforts. The message in this respect seems both simple and obvious. Unlike the fine arts or traditional craft trades, an individual employee working in a corporate or other organisational environment not only cannot, they should not work in anything but a collaborative fashion.

Given the apparent reasonableness of an organisational demand for collaborative effort, it seems entirely possible that this demand would have a potentially normative effect for people recruited to and employed by that organisation. In particular, people not so inclined (mavericks and the like) might find themselves hard pressed to either find or keep employment in such organisations. This has been an aspect of the various concerns which have been expressed, since at least William H. Whyte Jr. (most famously, in his The

41 ibid, p.167.
Of course, such concerns need to be qualified. First, it might be queried whether such demands actually exist as a strongly normative force at all, especially in today’s supposedly more ‘flexible’, and thereby potentially more ephemeral, organisations. Second, there is also the potential for any normative conformity (be it strong or otherwise) to manifest significant variation across different industries, institutions and even functional areas within organisations, and especially between individual employees. For example, it might be an explicit organisational policy that discrimination and harassment will not be tolerated (i.e. that employees will effectively play ‘nice’ with one another). Nonetheless, such activities might still be practiced in subtler, covert ways. Indeed, the implementation and enforcement of that policy might even constitute a form of intolerance within at least some organisations. And it is also entirely possible for both managers and other employees to only give ‘lip service’ to such imperatives as non-discriminatory practices, empowerment, ongoing improvement and the like, whilst all the while business goes on as usual.

However, all of this has more to do with the contingent, ontic nature of organisations and the individuals they employ, and in that respect any answer to the question of what normative force stories like HeroZ actually have on management practice and employee behaviour might best be left to the realm of empirical inquiry. This is not my purpose here. Consistent with what I have already outlined above, the main interest of this current paper is difficult to see how the underlying lessons of stories like HeroZ could not be considered normative in nature. ‘This’, they seem to say, is what it would be like ideally to be an employee. Not only does everyone get along better for behaving in this collaborative fashion (for the good, of course, of the company), but both their lives and the world generally is a better place for it. And all ends ‘happily ever after’. In the case of HeroZ, this (like all good management stories) includes the prospects of venturing out into the production of new goods and services, as well as new markets, thereby auguring ‘a great period in Lamron Castle’s history’, in which:

…over the long run, the Land of Lamron became peaceful and prosperous once more, with everybody earning more than enough gold to live a happy life.

To fully appreciate what this ‘happily ever after’ actually anticipates, it is important to note that the solution which HeroZ ultimately offers to the contemporary market problems of cost, efficiency, etc., does not dwell on the necessary demise, or at least severe curtailing, of the other castle-economies. It seems obvious that if the Lamron castle is so successful in its dragon-banishing and other services, that in a limited market (which all physical markets ultimately are, there being only so many dragons to banish etc.) it will displace other providers which try to compete with it. Insofar as this is the case, it might be suggested that the dominance of Lamron castle (i.e. as the established market in terms of resources, technology and temporal origin) is thereby endorsed, and that its ‘right’ to suppress other markets remains unquestioned. But in promoting this apparent ‘good’, HeroZ never considers (for example) the possible human costs of taking business from the other castle-economies.

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44 ibid, p.186.
45 In this context, one might ask what this reflects about Byham’s and Cox’s conception of the ‘good life’, and whether we would now be inclined to read this conception somewhat differently, especially post the recent Global Financial Crisis, as compared with the mid-1990s. In this respect, there is no doubt that there is now more of a mood (at least in some quarters) for greater financial regulation, and that unchecked individual greed (especially at the chief executive levels) is neither good in itself, nor indeed for stakeholder or general public interests. But despite some early rhetoric, the simple fact that most nations seem to be scrambling per Byham’s and Cox’s 1994 injunction to get their economies back ‘growing again’ might suggest that our conception of the good life (at least as this is portrayed by the actions of our political leaders) has not changed significantly. More importantly though,
Of course, one could amend this omission by supposing that any employee ‘lay-offs’ which the other castle economies are forced to incur are able to be absorbed by the expanding Lamron economy instead. But this simply reinforces the monopolistic assumptions built into HeroZ.

One might also object that a monopoly is not necessarily a bad thing. For example, the kind of monopoly which HeroZ envisages seems very different from the kinds of monopolies which can be understood as premising much of what passes for strategic management strategy.46 Specifically, the latter aims to identify and maintain competitive advantages, but which can thereby include establishing and enforcing anti-competitive barriers to potential business rivals. HeroZ, to the contrary, seems premised on the assumption that a monopolistic market is okay as long as it has a ‘right’ to be there by virtue of providing genuinely better, more cost-effective services. In a certain sense, it assumes that an ultimately monopolistic outcome is justified on the basis of a free market form of natural selection. However, it is important to appreciate how very different this is to biological Darwinian-inspired forms of natural selection, insofar as the latter expressly allow for biological niches to form. There are no such niches in HeroZ, only one initially struggling, but then ultimately ever-expanding, dominating market force. This is far more akin to the pathology of some resurgent and ultimately overpowering virus.

However, far more subversive is HeroZ’s express message of how we should behave towards one another in achieving this monopolistic paradise. A commercial monopoly is one thing. But in order to obtain this ‘pot-of-gold’ at the ‘end-of-the-rainbow’ the authors earlier, and indeed throughout the story, provide various advice as how to garner the support of other key stakeholders (employees, management and clients) in the goal of improving services – at either little or reduced cost. In other words, the authors provide advice which endorses a management vision in which employees must not only harness and steer their own efforts (including behaviours), but also those of other individual employees, to a more efficient, effective and ultimately profitable outcome. As already noted above, this includes ensuring that the efforts of key employees are steered away from insisting on more resources, to more affordable solutions of individual factory-floor efficiencies, inter-departmental cooperation and multi-skilling. But there are also two additional lessons which can be drawn from this: first, employees can be steered in this fashion; and second, not only this, but if employees are steered accordingly, then capitalist prosperity and indeed well-being will ultimately ensue for all concerned.

This is not only a strongly normative message, it is also an obviously rather simplistic one. No one, for instance, ever seriously revolts against what the worker heroes are trying to do. And in any case, everyone is able to be eventually swayed by, and inducted into, the force of the empowerment argument. It is like reading a capitalist version of early Soviet propaganda47. But people do revolt or otherwise oppose imposed initiatives, or if they are either incapable or unwilling to do so, harbour deep resentments. And they may do so on the basis of having values which are radically opposed to those which underpin what others are

my own view is that regardless of the precise features of that conception, the hegemonic tendencies inherent in it are what are truly and fundamentally flawed. Consistent with what I will shortly suggest below, this derives not from any competing conception of what ‘the good life’ should be, but rather from an appreciation of what is genuinely unique concerning the human condition, and therefore who we are as human beings per se.

47The resemblance is perhaps less surprising when one considers that certain foundational and essentially Taylorist (qua control) aspects of contemporary management practice had some welcome receptivity or analogue in early Soviet Russia. One example cited is Lenin’s views that early Taylorist ‘scientific’ management, despite being a vehicle for ‘bourgeois exploitation’ in the West, was nonetheless worthy of study for adaptation in communist Russia (e.g. see Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century, Monthly Review Press, New York/London, 1974, p.12; and cf. Stewart p.39). Another example is the Soviet five-year planning process, cited by Stewart as ‘surely the ultimate management challenge – took its inspiration directly from the work of Taylor’s most successful disciples, Henry L. Gantt’ (Stewart p.39). Also interesting are more recent management resonances with Taylorist control-cum-early Soviet planning interests, with Stewart claiming that it ‘is more than a coincidence’ that the 1960s emergence of strategic planning as a separate business concern ‘was cradled in the quasi-socialist command economy’ of the US military-industrial complex, with the work of Igor Ansoff at the US Lockheed corporation (ibid, p.182, and see also previous pp.).
trying to achieve. Significantly, the *HeroZ* fable effectively says that all these differences can be reconciled away. It never envisages, for instance, the need for participative fora in which the values which underpin those differences can be aired and discussed – but not necessarily ever resolved.

In this respect, both *HeroZ* and like management texts fundamentally misrepresent what it is to be a human being. The latter is not just about finding your role in society, as per Weber’s analysis of the Protestant foundations of capitalism 48, or even the seemingly related Simmelian ‘ideal’ of society providing such roles as its individual citizens find satisfying49. It is not even about the capacity of individuals to carve out new, more personally satisfying roles from those which society initially has to offer. Even the worker heroes of *HeroZ* do that. But what the worker heroes also do is offer an alternative that is also inherently delimiting. Specifically, they offer a supposed solution – a singleton set which washes all difference away, not only for the good of the company and society, but also (supposedly) for the good of the individuals themselves. Far beyond a simple commercial monopoly, this endorses a hegemonic way of being per se. A limited form of alterity (in the form of possible product and manufacturing diversification) is still possible, but it is ultimately delimited by an overarching mode of behaviour and associated thinking. Diversifying those modes themselves is simply unthinkable in the world of *HeroZ*.

And this is a truly terrible vision, because it washes away what seems genuinely unique to the human condition, which is to remain open to alternate possibility, and thereby also to the world in all its multifaceted form. It is this ability to seize upon alternate possibility that has defined not only our biological capacity to adapt to an ever-changing world (and our place within it), but also our capacity to live and evolve socially with one another. And it is only by this ability that we will be able to confront the related challenges that now press upon us, from long-anticipated diminishing resources to global warming, and ecologically and socio-economically sustainable, just and equitable living.

But that is another story.

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48 For example, compare what Weber says on the central role that someone’s ‘calling’ (in the sense of being divinely and therefore providentially destined for them) came to play in Lutheran and other Protestant, and thence also capitalist, thought (Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism, and Other Writings*, translated and edited by Peter Baehr and Gordon C Wells, Penguin Books, London, 2002, p.28 ff. and passim).

49 For example, see Simmel’s understanding of what constitutes ‘vocation’ in his essay ‘How Is Society Possible?’ (see the translation which is collected in Georg Simmel: *On Individuality and Social Forms – Selected Writings*, edited by Donald N Levine, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1971, pp.2–22). There Simmel claims that: (1) whilst ‘society within itself produces and offers to the individual a place’ which ‘can be filled by many individuals’; (2) ‘this place, in spite of its general character, is nevertheless taken by the individual on the basis of an inner calling, a qualification felt to be intimately personal’ (ibid, p.21).