

## Work and Play – Experiences in Toy Town

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### Abstract

The University of Northampton is in a town known for its shoe industry, but during the twentieth century it became 'Toy Town' and a national centre of innovation for the British toy industry. The University has been working with the town's industry and organisations, to capture the local toy history but more importantly to understand the creative value of play and toy design to the locality. Drawing on experience in teaching and working with toy businesses this paper focuses on the creative relationship between work and play. How do the toys you play with as child lead to a career choice? How is the world of work reflected in toy design today? Is play as 'a child's work'? Or is this a notion that is being undermined in today's schools? Does playing with games and toys develop skills for work? Is a 'play' office interior truly creative? Does continuing to use play aspects of work – such as tinkering – keep us happier in retirement? Our studies into the value of play started with toy design projects on undergraduate courses, where we observed that play seemed to encourage creativity. Has this experience been shared in other disciplines and with more recent cohorts? How have our graduates transferred their skills to the local industry and into the work place? The paper sets out to reflect on the community experience of staff, graduates and local employers and to share some provisional thoughts about the vital creative links between work and play.

Keywords: creativity, play, work, community, toy design, innovation

The University of Northampton is based in a town known for its shoe industry, but during the twentieth century it became 'Toy Town' (Thomas, 2016) and a regional and national centre of innovation in the British toy industry. This started with Bassett Lowke's model engineering company producing small scale railways for his wealthy customers. Outdoor play has also been important within the county; Wicksteed, in nearby Kettering has been producing outdoor play equipment since 1918. By the 1950s and 1960s the county was the centre of a wide range of toy firms like Corgi and Rosebud Dolls. These firms were innovating using new plastic tooling to produce novel products, such as the space hopper and the hair styling head. Northamptonshire remains a centre of toy and play equipment design. Distribution companies such as DKL and John Crane Toys. Toy Master the buying organization, for independent toy shops, is based in the town because of its geography and play legacy. The University has specialized in educating those who will

work in the creative industries or work in fields like teaching and health where play is seen beneficial. Play has generated local enterprises and these firms continue to employ design graduates.



Mettoy Racing Car

Play for this paper is defined in the widest of terms building on the work of Huizinga (1998) and Sutton-Smith (1986). Play is seen as a social process (Mauss, 1954) found in all cultures. Everyone plays and it is not a just the work of children. The 'All Play' exhibitions (Thomas & Schaber, 2013) highlighted the benefits of play: to early years education, to creative businesses, as well as public health and well-being. Creativity and innovation are sought by academics in students' work but also by employers seeking to grow and develop their enterprises to meet future challenges and markets. "The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves".(Carl Jung, 1923 quoted by Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.42).

Creativity for Hegarty (2014) is based his own experience in the adverting industry. He encourages play as a generator of new ideas, creative industries like advertising. Nachmanovitch (1990) as a musician, explores improvisation – free play. The ability to work within and outside the rules of particular practice generates original outputs; be it when cooking a dish, playing a musical piece, writing a book or a designing a product. Creativity is about the process of generating something new. Creativity may result in a very personal transitory achievement or something that is life changing for a much wider community.

Work can be defined as all those things we are obliged to do for daily survival (Armitage, 2016). Some trace the notion of work being good to the Protestant Work Ethic (Weber, 2009). The split between the world of work and home came with industrial revolution (Laslett, 2004). One could argue that many of the playful and creative aspects of work were removed and marginalised by the division of labour, followed by mechanisation and automation. The history the design of offices can be tracked against these historical changes and more recently seem to follow new management theories and approaches (Forty, 1986). Work and play are certainly

not opposites. Some of us make a living through play and work can be playful, fun and creative.

The University of Northampton has been working with the town's businesses and organisations, to capture their local industrial history but also understand the other benefits of play in their business. What is the value of play to the wider community and the economy (Thomas, 2013)? This paper is informed by practice-based observation and as well as more formal historical research. A series of semi-structured interviews were undertaken with local people involved in the toy industry to compliment those undertaken by the Museum of Childhood (V&A, 2014, Thomas, 2013). More informative observations were gained through teaching practice and participant research with a number of play related projects In Northampton. These included externally funded 'Knowledge Transfer Partnerships' (KTPs) including those with Sue Ryder Care and John Crane Toys. Research was also undertaken in preparation for three exhibitions, with the purpose of involving and gaining insights from the local community through visitor feedback (Thomas, 2013). Play and toy related projects have continued to be included in the University's design curriculum and new staff have been asked to contribute their insights into the value of play in their work as teachers.



KTP Projects at All Work and No Play Exhibition, Collective Collaborations Gallery in Northampton June 2012

### **How do the toys you play with as child lead to a career choice?**

At the two 'All Play' exhibitions visitors were asked to draw or write about their memories of play and toys. The most common verbal feedback received at the exhibitions was about the toys visitors had owned and how they influenced their career choices. A textile technician recalled the inspiration she had from a vintage Parisian paper doll book her parents had allowed her to play with, as it inspired her interest in fashion. Engineers commented on the Bassett Lowke toy steam engines. Many commented that they retained their own scale models, continued to collect examples or repurchased new versions for their children. The significance to

their careers was often only triggered when visitors saw the toys again.

Brenda and Robert Vale (2013) certainly hint at the links between playing with construction toys and changing architecture styles. Modernist architects like Le Corbusier, seemed to appreciate the value of play on child development and well-being. Those that taught at the Bauhaus encouraged interdisciplinary performances and music. The Century of the Child exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (Kinchin & O'Connor, 2012) showcased the close connections between childhood and the design developments throughout the last century. Architectural Technology Design students interviewed, as they joined their course, cited computer games like Minecraft or Sim City as inspiration for their degree choices. Building blocks, even virtual ones can inspire. The significance to their careers was often only triggered when visitors saw the toys again.

### **What about the role of an influential adult or parent?**

The purchaser of a toy can encourage and reinforce certain interests and behaviours. Friedemann Schaber, a Product Design Senior Lecturer said he was influenced by Lego. He also remembered being influenced Fisher Technic's toys. A relative who worked for the company gave him the toys, so they came with a personal endorsement. My own son tested out toys I had designed and was introduced to vintage properties that his father continued to follow. At primary school he had the opportunity to work as a junior reporter. He wrote an article on the London Toy Fair for the Newham Recorder (Battle, 2001). He has gone on to edit children's magazines including Thunderbirds and 100% Gaming. How important are these experiences, positive role models and work experience opportunities? These toys and play memories are retained and recalled at a later date. Jonathan Thorpe, Managing Director at John Crane Toys, always argued, during the KTP, that it was the parent or grandparent who was the purchaser not the child. The child may show an aptitude or interest but it is the adult who responds buys the toys, drives to the football training or dance class. Their choices are influenced by childhood experiences.



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Play has been shown to remain important, even when such adult role models are missing or even negative. Marc Bush (2018) presented a paper at an internal conference at the University, on a project that looks at how young people address adversity in their lives. His government funded research, has found that play is a positive response to adversity such as: poverty, family crisis, or gang violence. Play provision for these children would include access to toys libraries, extra-curricular school activities, sport clubs, and performance spaces. The therapeutic benefits of play were highlighted and featured in the 'All Play' exhibitions. Sometimes such facilities are considered as unnecessary extras. Funding for such projects such as

after-school clubs and youth centres have had state funding withdrawn in the United Kingdom and are increasingly depend on charitable donations.

Successful adults are often asked who were their role models or memorable teachers. Who inspired, suggested and provided opportunities to build a successful career? One of the surprising feedbacks we had to the All Play in exhibitions in 2012 was from a group of teacher trainers. They were attending a Conference on another campus and insisted that the value of play in primary and early years education in the United Kingdom was being undermined. According to the teacher trainers, play was no longer seen as essential by policy makers. The value of play that had been central to early years teaching for decades was seen as being undermined by an overloaded restrictive curriculum, reintroduction of formal classroom layouts and testing. Are similar policies at secondary school, doing a disservice in the UK, by stressing core subjects, like mathematics and science and dropping the creative arts from the curriculum as well as reducing play or sports spaces in the schools? The academics visiting the exhibition certainly thought so and went the very next day to lobby Parliament to reconsider their policies.

### **Does playing with games and toys develop skills for work?**

Today, role play is standard practice in many management training programs. The currently popular Design Thinking approach (Curedale, 2013) uses a variety play based techniques or tools in order to understand the user and generate innovate business solutions. Serious play is serious business with toy companies like



Lego. They run training courses to help businesses use play to build teams, understand users' needs and innovate new products. Toys and games are important tools for research in the engineering and computing departments. Gamification is seen as technique to increase engagement by employees or customers by making a work task fun. The challenges and possibility of winning are used as incentives. Playing games develop quite specific skills. It is understood, that just east of Northamptonshire, there are military bases, where young computer gamers have been recruited if they have the skills to operate new technology like drones. Links between war, play, and toys is nothing new. Humans, like many animals, develop their

fighting strength and learn appropriate skills through play.

### **Is a play office interior truly creative?**

Firms like Google have led the way with flexible interior designs that purposefully echo the playground with slides or recreating relaxing spaces like beach huts.

Or would it better to provide facilities and time for play outside the nine to five routine, like sports clubs? Some Victorian industrialists like Titus Salt, the Cadbury Family and Lever Brothers, provided far more than the funding for a brass band or football club – they built entire communities like Saltaire, Bourneville or Port Sunlight. Time for play was integral to these developments.

Business incentives schemes often contain targets to win prizes in the form of vouchers for leisure activities and playful treats. Integrated marketing campaigns use toys and playthings as a key part in such promotions; activity books, ceramic piggy banks, soft toys (that often become collectible). One could measure to see if licensed merchandise is commercially successful when there it is considered a playful property. The first Star Wars Film's merchandise is said to have started toy licensing in the UK because of the income generated allowed them to invest in further productions. It certainly boosted the toy industry in the Northampton region. The effect was not new magazine and newspaper cartoons like Bonzo the Dog (Babb and Owen, 1988) can trace the effect back to the 1920s. Today, integration is key, so book publishers seek partnerships with live performance venues, games companies, film producers, and of course, toy licensing agreements, to insure the success of a particular title or author.

The University of Northampton has recently moved to a new campus. One of the first buildings completed was a Business Innovation Centre. It was planned as a hub for small creative companies. The Interior Design course used the empty offices as an opportunity for students to work on a real location. Staff members briefed them to design a creative work space (Turner & Meyerson, 1998) and pop-shop for the foyer area. By 2015-16 academic year, Google type play offices were seen as old fashioned by some academics and students were encouraged to study current solutions. Some picked up on new variants like ribbons or tracks that run through the spaces, forming walkways, tables and rooves for meeting spaces. Others choose a theme often used in children play, that of a miniature town; so large group spaces become town halls and stair cases a seating for an auditorium. This group has now graduated and one is now working for Kompan another playground design company, with a base in the region.

Angelique Wisse, the staff member involved, commented that she felt that the student's ideas were derivative because they lacked enough work experience. Her own career had introduced her to such creative work spaces and she left that many employers were not necessarily seeking to generate creativity in these spaces. Instead she felt that they were trying to encourage staff to stay on the office and work beyond their contract hours. There is also a concern that allowing play at work generates noise and distraction that may only be suited to particular creative industries and individuals. She encouraged the development of a narrative which the students picked up on with a 'ribbon' design and the town-based stories. I asked some of the Interior students about playful spaces. Ana Moarcas, a recent graduate responded that she thinks of sketching as play. For Ana it is more about playing around with ideas. Her final year project was a community library encouraging literacy through playful uses of spaces.

Interestingly, the pop-up shop part of the brief suggested new communi-



ty/craft-based scenarios; a book club, beekeeping equipment and a farm shop. The revival of crafts, such as barber shops and whole animal butchers, have a 'hands on' skilful performance element (Ocejo, 2017). These businesses are popping up in City Centres close to creative offices – Chelsea in New York or Shoreditch in London – and in Northampton too.

### **Does continuing to use play aspects of work – such as tinkering – keep us happier at work and into retirement?**

A paper at recent engineering education conference in Denmark saw tinkering as a vital creative process for training on engineering courses (Mader & Dertein, 2016). Caring for an old car, motorcycle or old tech product becomes a passion for many. The Men in Sheds, started in Australia has proved to be a very positive retirement activity for men in particular, from all sorts of backgrounds, not necessarily those who made or built things in their previous careers.

The body of research undertaken at the University on Northampton started because we noticed in practice how toy and play related projects at undergraduate level seemed to encourage creativity and enthusiasm make models and test out their ideas (Schaber, 2008). Has first-hand experience been found in other disciplines and with more recent cohorts? Friedemann Schaber reflected on the courses' work with toy companies. He commented that they were not regular events or rigorously analysed enough to make a definitive response. For him creativity is innate and although play projects might enhance creative abilities students need to have the basic skills to design as well as enthusiasm to be successful. Creativity as described by Nachmanovitch comes out after learning and practicing the skills, in this case the skills of a designer.



Model Train Engineering enthusiasts exhibiting their model train shed in Newham, London

### **How have our graduates transferred their skills to the local industry?**

The KTP projects did generate local employment. Stuart Betts (2007) was the

Associate at Sue Ryder and went on to work with John Crane where he was joined by Chris Doyle. The firm was sold to Big Jigs in 2018 and Stuart has moved to work with them. Chris Doyle, whilst on the degree course had won the RSA Student Design completion with this toy storage box/toy/table. He was offered several posts and toy firms before joining John Crane Toys locally. So, he has decided to go freelance working in graphics as well as with toy companies.

A series of graduates have gone to work for Miracle, another local playground company; including Adam Marshall who went on to design open play spaces in Northampton Parks. Tony Conroy a student who won a prize on a live project with John Crane Toys whilst an undergraduate. He went on to do an MA in Industrial Design and now designs playful office furniture and products for luxury yachts. Should we consider yachts just toys or play things for the wealthy elite?

### **How is the changing world of work reflected in toy design today?**

Toy manufacturers are very slowly moving away from gender toys. Role models are changing or the image of child is being removed from the packaging all together. Maybe it is time for the barber head? There is a lot of sharing/copying of ideas in the toy industry; for example, when the television program about sick pets – Animal Hospital – become popular, suddenly Barbie became a vet. Toys are being designed based on abstract forms, fantasy or monsters. Fiction and storytelling about “a land far far away” still have an appeal – escapism from the humdrum of work appeals. Many of those unskilled jobs are disappearing being replaced by machine, so toys are now reflecting new careers in their design.

Toys for some are a hobby or a private indulgence and not part of their work experience. The puritan arguments still resonate. An interest play and sport can be distracting lead to addictions to gaming and gambling. Play has a seedier side. The design department some years ago was asked to design adult sex toys but this was considered inappropriate, if not unethical. Certainly not something the course could use to promote its offer to international applicants and parents funding their studies. One of our first graduates went on to work for a computer gaming website, so how graduates adapt their new skills to job opportunities, is not prescribed by their design education.

When we curated the exhibitions, we wrongly assumed that everyone accepted play is beneficial especially in early year education. The value of play debate in seems to remain strong in educational circles. In a similar way, there remain split opinions what is a good toy. Many toys seem to be marketed to what the producers ‘think’ parents perceive as a ‘good’ toy to buy for their children and choose based on the long-accepted child development theories, like the work of Piaget (2011) that such toys will help them learn and develop. In reality toys and playthings are often bought as distractions, to share or relive a childhood experience, to satisfy a genuine request (or pester), in addition of all the usual factors such fashions, functions, status and price (Thomas, 2017).

Steve McGonigal, when teaching on the product course, set a project just giving



the students the word 'play' as a starting place for a design. The resulting projects covered everything from performance to playthings for pets and included sports equipment for adult and children. Play enabled the students to think laterally as there were no specific constraints about appropriateness or safety. When asked where his own toy adventures began, he mentioned plastic Airfix kits. His specialism on the course was encouraging student to develop proficiency in computer aided design – so that they would have the skills to work in volume production as well as create bespoke and specialist products using three-dimensional printing. These are the skills many toy firms are looking for in a global market.

Some organizations promote toys that encourage learning or creativity but deride today's technology-based toys linked to our 21<sup>st</sup> century connected world (Thomas, 2017). Is that not where the work is today? Several of this year's final product designers are choosing to design helmets to make play safer. Others are design monitoring devices and exercise equipment to make safer and more playful. It seems physical play activities are being mechanised swiftly so the user can measure the health benefits and reduce the costs of a risk or mistake.

## Conclusion

Northampton was at the height of its involvement in the toy industry in the 1966 when England last won the World Cup. Its companies have been extremely innovative in the production of miniature vehicles and rotary moulding of plastics for dolls and footballs. Many of these firms failed to keep up with changing technology specifically in electronics or others were bought out by larger US firms keen for a foothold in the Common Market in the 1970s. The machine tools designed in the country were exported successfully globally aiding cheaper production elsewhere. Key toy distribution and playground design companies remain that seeking design expertise from the design school. The design and distribution of toys and playthings is continuing contributor to a local economy. Innovation can be in the form of tools and processes as well as the toys themselves.

The paper set out to reflect on experience of staff, graduates and local employers in design department in one toy town in the UK to another share its experience toy research centre in Paris. Work and play are linked in academia. Design Schools have to work and play to develop the creative skills necessary to innovate.

Retrospection in later life seems to reinforce the idea that play encourages skills and aptitudes for later careers. Adults do share their love of play and particular toys with the next generation. They will continue to take up opportunities to play whatever their age. Play is still seen by some adults as self-indulgent and a waste of time and resources. Recently, benefits of play have been under-valued in some sectors such as education and local community facilities for the young.

Play and work may have been divided into separate spheres as part of the industrialisation process. Despite there have been individual entrepreneurs who have understood the benefits of play to the world of work. Play is used to encourage a work force and insure its health and well-being. It is used to innovate and

generate new products and services. Toys are a key element in promotional campaigns to sell goods and services.

Creative firms have tried to bring the playground into the work space; this visible evocation of childhood activities evolving into new forms like miniature towns. Some provide a diversity of work spaces that suit different types of people and tasks. As we move to even more flexible spaces work and play are being combined in the home once again and people are continuing to work and play well beyond retirement.

Bringing play and toy projects into the academic design studio has directly led to graduates working in a wide range of local toy and play related businesses. Design Thinking has introduced creative and play practices at management level in a wide range of organisations. So, now toys and play are seen as part of the innovation process.

Toys are more slowly reflecting changes in the workplace. Toys are becoming less gender specific. Nevertheless, they still reflect adults' choices. They may choose things loved or they think are 'good' and old debates are revived around wood and plastics. Today, toys reflect changing technology some work skills are enhanced and others like fine hand eye co-ordination are being lost.

Work, play and creativity need to be integrated together; in education, business and the wider community in order to enhance everyone's lives.

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