

**This is the accepted version of the article published as:**

Ashton, D. and Giddings, S. (2018) 'At work in the toybox: bedrooms, playgrounds and ideas of play in creative cultural work', *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*. DOI: 10.1177/1465750318757157

**At work in the toybox: bedrooms, playgrounds and ideas of play in creative cultural work**

Dr Dan Ashton, University of Southampton

Dr Seth Giddings, University of Southampton

Abstract

Key companies and commentators on the new economy have identified *play* as a crucial aspect of entrepreneurship and commercial innovation. We will argue that play and place are inseparable in these discourses: from places such as Google's HQ - the Googleplex, with its ball pits and slides - to schemes and practices such as Lego Serious Play, children's play and sites of play are taken as the model for, and wellspring of, imagination and creativity, modes and spaces of thinking and experimentation that can invigorate and innovate the adult worlds of cultural and technological production. Taking as case studies Google's reimagining of cultural practices of play, and LEGO Serious Play's deployment of playful experimentation for corporate / therapeutic ends, this paper argues that to understand the possibilities of playful *working* places, it is necessary to question the generally uncritical assumptions about the character and potential of play itself that underpin these initiatives.

Keywords

Play; Creativity; Management; Google; LEGO; LEGO Serious Play

## **At work in the toybox: bedrooms and playgrounds as the ur-places of creative cultural work**

### **Introduction**

Key companies and commentators on the new economy have identified *play* as a crucial aspect of entrepreneurship and commercial innovation (Gropper and Kleiner, 1992; Schrage, 1999). We will argue that play and place are inseparable in these discourses: from places such as Google's HQ - the Googleplex, with its ball pits and slides - to schemes and practices such as Lego Serious Play, children's play and sites of play are taken as the model for, and wellspring of, imagination and creativity, modes and spaces of thinking and experimentation that can invigorate and innovate the adult worlds of cultural and technological production (Kane 2004; Lutticken 2006).

Taking as case studies the Google's reimagining of cultural practices of play, and LEGO Serious Play's deployment of playful experimentation for corporate / therapeutic ends, we will explore these corporations' mapping of places of childhood play onto their *working* environments and practices. These non-work spaces include the bedroom, from the child's bedroom and toys to the young adult coder video producer and model-maker, and the back garden or playground spaces of outdoor play, along with play equipment, toys and other playful technologies. We are particularly concerned with the ideas and assumptions about *play* that underlie this evocation of sites of childhood imaginative, free and creative activity for creative strategies in the workplace. Drawing on the work of developmental psychologist and play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, we will suggest that romantic and nostalgic assumptions - rhetorics - of play are evident in Google and LEGO, to the detriment of a more critical understanding of play and its possibilities (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Through critical attention to play itself in bedrooms and backyards (Opie, 1994; Christensen & O'Brien, 2002), we will ask

to what extent do professional invocations of imaginative and creative play connect with actual everyday sites and activities.

### **Productive play**

Play can be intimately connected with ideas of innovation and idea development. Within performance management discourses, the notion of changing the work environment to promote play is well established. Gropper and Kleiner (1992, p 14) in the early 1990s review approaches to 'creative play' and the goal to 'stimulate creativity, growth, challenge and personal development while maintaining a motivated and productive organization.' Within organizational settings the facilitation of creative play can include the arrangement of physical spaces, the introduction of toys, time for 'non-work' activities and the focus on the informal (see Fleming, 2005; Krempel and Beyes, 2011). The blending of the playful within workplace cultures is often directly linked to organisational goals and strategies.

Writing with reference to "the knowledge economy", Banks (2005, p 219) considers how 'firms are compelled to develop a creative, innovative capacity that can generate new ideas, solutions and products.' This capacity is 'determined by managerial priorities and goals and what we might call the "workplace culture"' (Banks, 2005, p. 219). Based on the research of work/play space of 'new media workers', Neff et al. (2005, p 315) explore how workplace cultures are constructed through a set of fairly common approaches:

Visions of creativity influence the architectural designs and social organization of new media workspaces. Bright colors, open floor plans and self-conscious design mark these spaces as different from corporate settings. Newspaper articles about new media firms frequently note such amenities as basketball hoops on doors and pool tables in conference rooms, beer in the fridge and weekly massages

Activities including massages, drinking alcohol and playing have a role in reconfiguring relationships between different elements of social life.

Understandings of where and how work take place are bound up with ideas of flexibility, mobility, informality and playfulness. Hughes (2001) notes how the New Economy 'liked to emphasise the continuity and even overlap between professional and domestic spaces [...] At the level of aesthetics, work and play had become infinitely swappable.' However, as she goes on to reflect in exploring the demise of 'dress down Fridays' at the turn of century: 'employers had the vague hope that allowing people to wear buff-coloured trousers to the office would signal a loosening up of mental boundaries which, in turn, would release a stream of "beyond the box" thinking' (Hughes, 2001). The seemingly inherent possibilities of changing working environments to facilitate creativity has by now been well rehearsed and well critiqued. For example, Banks (2005: 226) is critical of the 'ongoing tendency for managers and firms to view creativity solely as a calculable and manageable aspect of psychological behaviour, amenable to a quick fix.' Specifically in relation to play, Kane's (2004) "play audit" questions the integration of play within an organisation and the extent to which this is limited to the introduction of masseurs and videogame consoles. For Kane (2004, p 275), there is concern around the 'easy acceptance of a certain version of the "play ethic" in the new economy.' Whilst there might be a growing fatigue associated with some of the more obvious and less nuanced attempts to "make work fun", there also still exists a curiosity and appetite for exploring this.

The terms "play", "creativity", and "imagination" are persistently invoked as unambiguously positive, progressive and productive. Moreover, they are often conflated - play is imaginative and creative, imagination is creative and playful, and so on. Yet each of these terms has a

complex and often contradictory set of ideological, institutional and industrial histories. To adequately explore the connections between everyday and workplace spaces of play, we will need a deeper understanding of these terms.

### **The contradictions and rhetorics of play**

Firstly, we would note that there is a marked tension, contradiction even, between the operationalisation of play in workplaces and its aims to bring into work the freedom and open-endedness of children's imaginative play. The famous ball-pits and slides of Google offices invoke spontaneity but are integral to sophisticated and highly engineered spaces and practices. As we will see, both Google and LEGO Serious Play have relationship managers and facilitators whose role and responsibilities include configuring spaces, making materials for play available, and facilitating playful interactions.

Secondly, anthropological and psychological studies of play regard it as a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that covers a wide range of social and individual behaviours. In his book *The Ambiguity of Play*, the influential play theorist Brian Sutton Smith set out the seven key "rhetorics" that he identified as underlying most writing and research on play. These are *play as progress*, *play as fate*, *play as power*, *play as identity*, *play as imaginary*, *play as the self*, and *play as frivolous*. As we will see, claims for the value of playful approaches to work and innovation, epitomised in our Google and LEGO case studies, tend to fall into the first, third, and fourth of these rhetorics: play as progressive, as identity (social, community building), and as imaginary (characterised by creative and imaginative activity).

*Play as progress* refers to notions of play as primarily a developmental process, for instance children or animals learning about their environment and training their own physical and mental capabilities through experimentation and play. This rhetoric can be traced back through educational discourses over a century or more. *Play as imaginary* is closely bound up with notions of the developmental, with imagination feeding creativity and hence innovation. It is notable that *play as fate* and *play as power* rarely feature in ideas about play in work. The former generally refers to games of chance - particularly gambling, and 'rests on the assumption that human lives are controlled by destiny'. *Play as power* is best exemplified in games of competition, generally determined by mental skill (e.g. chess) or physical prowess (sport) rather than chance. Each is associated with, on the one hand, the formal and rule-bound structure of games and sport rather than free play as such, and on the other with underlying universalising attitudes to the world and society as driven, respectively, by chance or fate and by competition or conflict. Sutton Smith's aim is not to categorise different kinds of play and games, but rather to point out that any discussion and application of play to philosophy, social research, etc. is predicated on one or more of these notions of play, excluding or ignoring others.

The unexplored tension between *play as imagination* and *play as frivolous* is central to our discussion here. Educational and industrial attitudes to imagination validate play in its potential to drive creativity and innovation, downplaying or ignoring the tendency towards the frivolous, whimsical, fantastical - and hence non-instrumental behaviour. This rhetoric of frivolity can apply to the long history of the trickster and the fool; to the festive and carnivalesque; to playful resistance to the norms of everyday life (including work); and - significantly for us - to the nonsense, symbolic violence and obscenity that characterised

much if not most play in young children. Even the more reflective and well-researched instantiations of theories of play in industry tend to present a romantic and ostensibly unproblematic version of children's play as free, imaginative and unproblematically creative - ripe for adoption and application for the more "productive" ends of adult industry. Yet, as we'll see in our case studies, there is work to be done in establishing and maintaining the programme of productive play, not least around the notion of *imagination*, a mental capacity that, in discourses on play, can present itself as productive and creative, or as frivolous, whimsical and fantastical.

### **Constructing play: Google and LEGO**

We have chosen as case studies Google's working environments and the consultancy scheme LEGO Serious Play. Each has an emblematic presence in both specialised and popular discussions of the contemporary blurring of work and play. The Googleplex is famous for its ball-pits and slides, and Serious Play has captured attention through the vivid image of professional adults 'playing' with LEGO toys in the boardroom. Both Google and LEGO have fostered organisational approaches relating to play that are evident in both their corporate identity and everyday working cultures and spaces. Both organisations have garnered significant public interest and are approached as innovators in workplace cultures (Singh, 2017). Examining entrepreneurship, Taylor (2015) notes the wide range of media representations and suggests that journalistic reporting is one of the ways in which understandings of entrepreneurship are constructed and positioned. Likewise, we are interested in the ways in which play within the fields of business and enterprise is afforded visibility through journalistic accounts and promotional materials. Our analysis does not aim for an exhaustive account of journalistic coverage. Rather, we focus on mix of public materials

by which each organisation makes visible its experimentation and invocation of play within workplace cultures.

For Google we focus on four articles which present “insider views” within popular publications – *Business Insider* (Bort, 2013; Edwards; 2013), *Time* (Hoagland, n.d.), and *Fast Company* (2013). Each of these articles seemingly negotiates the public/open and private/close frontiers of Google to provide “access”. As Holt and Vonderau (2015) explore with Google’s data centres, these are though carefully curated tours and presentations which form part of carefully conceived corporate identity and public profile. Our focus on these “insider view” articles connects our research with a wider body of research on what Caldwell (2006) defined as critical industrial practice. Examining television industries in the United States of America, Caldwell (2006: 99) explores how the:

close examination of industrial textual practice (programming events, network branding [the NBC-2000 campaign], station IDs, making-ofs, video press kits, promo tapes, TV-web synergies, and ancillary marketing) shows how the industry theorizes its presence in moving image form, even as it teaches the audience at home by publicly circulating (sanctioned) “insider” knowledge about the televisual apparatus

The opportunity to engage with “insider” knowledge afforded to journalists (and academics such as Johnston, 2014) forms part of how Google shares its versions and visions of play.

Similarly, the LEGO Group provides extensive documentation of its history, current projects and ethos on its various websites. Its charitable and educational arm the LEGO Foundation in particular funds and disseminates academic research on children’s play and learning. All of these activities and corporate bodies, not least LEGO Serious Play, are underpinned by a clear address to the LEGO brand and its presentation of play as creative, imaginative and



educational (Giddings, 2017). As the following sections now turn to, specific constructions and operationalisations of play are evident in the materials we review.

### **Google play**

In telling the story of Google, the early days and the 'startup' beginnings are very important and provide a key reference point in establishing Google's culture (Google, n.d. 'Our Culture').

The importance of the 'start-up' entrepreneurial approach is explicitly articulated in accounts of how and where "Googlers" work:

We've come a long way from the dorm room and the garage. We moved into our headquarters in Mountain View, California – better known as the Googleplex – in 2004. Today Google has more than 70 offices in more than 40 countries around the globe. Though no two Google offices are the same, visitors to any office can expect to find a few common features: murals and decorations expressing local personality; Googlers sharing cubes, yurts and "huddles"; video games, pool tables and pianos; cafes and "microkitchens" stocked with healthy food; and good old fashioned whiteboards for spur-of-the-moment brainstorming.  
(Google, n.d. 'Locations')

For Google, the emphasis on start-up culture suggests an ethos operating across the whole organisation that emphasises creative exploration and play.

As McAveeny (2013) notes in his article for *Wired*, 'startup culture has received a lot of attention lately — people are looking for ways to improve the overall experience at work and some are even champions of seamlessly integrating work into their life.' McAveeny specifically draws a link between startup ways of working and efforts to improve workplace experiences and environments. McAveeny is not though adding specific quirks and perks to the list of interventions and initiatives that have been introduced and developed within wider discourses of performance management (Gropper and Kleiner, 1992). For McAveeny (2013), the crucial aspect is the culture. This is what keeps that new hires 'after the initial excitement

of an onsite kegerator and free housekeeping wears off' and it cannot be defined 'solely based on Nerf guns, LAN parties and beer o'clock Fridays.' In many respects Google's list including murals, yurts and videogames resonates with Kane's (2004) concerns noted above on the superficial ways in which "fun" might be partially and instrumentally operating and McAveaney's comments on novelty features. However, the long-standing implementation of these elements and their embeddedness within working practices and organisational cultures arguably differentiates Google. This is an innovation and workplace culture built around play, rather than making a space for play.

Google's entrepreneurial approach to innovation can be usefully examined alongside Hjorth's (2004) analysis of how entrepreneurial processes for innovation are managed. Hjorth (2004: 413) suggests that, 'when entrepreneurship is promoted as a managerial strategy for innovation, the need to secure control transforms the creative forces of entrepreneurial processes into strategized behaviour.' This includes self-management in relation to normative guidelines and the creation of "proper places" that are 'set up in the name of economy and by the force of combining economics and behaviourism' (Hjorth, 2004: 42). Hjorth (2004) then uses de Certeau to highlight the tactics and spaces that respond to these managerial strategies for "proper places" of innovation. Specifically, they refer to tactics and spaces for play/invention as "other spaces". With Google however, the ball pits, yurts, murals, videogames and so on, are so ubiquitous and embedded that these "proper places" and "others spaces" could be seen to blur and blend. The start-up and entrepreneurial ethos operates not to carve out a space for play within Google places and structure. Rather, this approach to play and invention structures the entire operation and organisation of Google's places. This is less about transforming playful entrepreneurial approaches into strategized

behaviour, but instead about building any strategized behaviour with and around these approaches. Returning to our earlier comments engaging with Sutton Smith, we would argue that there are contradictions and rhetorics of play to examine. Whilst we have suggested that Google's entrepreneurial approach is built around a culture of play, rather than attempting to insert play as a management strategy, it is crucial to question what the specific understandings of play are. As we examine Google's industrial textual practices relating to play, some of these specific understandings and contradictions emerge.

In introducing the Google culture, the message is that 'offices and cafés are designed to encourage interactions between Googlers within and across teams, and to spark conversation about work as well as play' (Google, n.d., 'Our Culture'). The Google 'our culture' page provides examples of playful interactions illustrated by fourteen images of different offices showing off distinctive features including the bowling alley in Mountain View, the indoor park in London, and the "mother's room" in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The public visibility of Google's offices, not just on the company's own website but also in the 'access some areas' tours given to publications such as *Business Insider*, is an integral part of how Google presents itself and the playful interactions it promotes. The significance of seeing Google is further illustrated by the extension of visibility beyond the office to their data centres. As Holt and Vonderau (2015, p 73) argue:

Google's data centers literally span the globe, their images imply a seamless, universal connection, a benevolent reach, and even a no-impact environmental presence with a corporate-designed bicycle featured in one shot as the "transportation of choice" around the data center

With the images presented of their data centres, Holt and Vonderau argue that there are a number of intended meanings. The careful presentation of Google's physical locations make suggestions and synergies with its less visible operations. Similarly, the portrayals of these

office spaces are suggestive of a culture of creativity and experimentation built around playful interactions.

In a photo slideshow for *Time*, titled 'Life in the Googleplex', Hoagland (n.d) presents a picture with the caption 'Google employees take an afternoon volley ball break' and describes how the 'corporation's Mountain View campus is at once a flurry of playful activity and creative technological innovation.' Whilst it is not clear how volleyball embodies this combination, the intersection of the playful and (technological) innovation is a dominant dimension to Google and shows off the kinds of approaches that Banks (2005) identifies with the knowledge economy. Another image in the slideshow shows a "Googler" playing with an electric racing car track that is laid out on the floor. This scene shows that 'there are toys for employees' children and for the young-at-heart Googlers like this one' (Hoagland, n.d.). The introduction of toys chimes with Google's aim to encourage a playful approach to work, here making a direct connection with domestic spaces of play (the bedroom or playroom floor) and a particular *time* of play (childhood, however vaguely or nostalgically understood). We will return to this invocation of a childhood space and time of play later, but it is worth noting here the ambiguity in this image and its caption towards this race track: it's not clear where the track is located or how often it is available; is it there for employees' children? If a Googler stops to play is he or she taking a break from work, or is this toy intended to be part of the company's overall creative and productive application of play?

In her tour of Google's "Luxurious" Googleplex Campus In California, Bort (2013) included a picture of the park at the north edge of campus which consists of tennis courts, soccer fields, fitness stations, and frisbee golf. This provision is part of a logic of continual access, whereby a range of activities and amenities are available on campus – lessening the need to move off

campus. For Bratton (2015, p 43), such 'efforts are made to couch the programmer lifestyle in its own idiosyncratic luxuries and to dampen any distraction or discomfort that might interrupt collaborative innovation, include perhaps going home.' The opportunities for playing tennis, soccer and frisbee golf are not a distraction from work, but a reason to stay at work. Play activities are carefully folded into worker's holistic Google experience. We find here what Sørensen and Spoelstra's (2012, p 294) analyse as play as 'a continuation of work by other means.' Within this, tensions can be identified between the intentions for filling space with materials and resources to spark interactions, and how it might be encountered and experienced. In this thread to Quora attributed to a former employee, the status and purposes of the 'perk' spaces takes on a problematic dimension:

[...] if you have to work in one of the four main campus buildings, you will most likely be extremely cramped. It's not uncommon to see 3-4 employees in a single cube, or several managers sharing an office. With all the open areas for food, games, TV, tech talks, etc, it can be surprisingly hard to find a quiet, private place to think (Edwards, 2013).

Further to the challenges that these perks might pose, the exact nature of play within this context and to whom it is available demands further examination.

The following picture that Bort includes of the park shows signs indicating that it is not open to public. Here then the logic of continual access extends only to a specific population. Similarly, reflecting on his tour of Google Sydney and some of the signs encountered, Johnston (2014, p 13) argues that, the 'egalitarian and open-access design of the space is belied by a subtler control and surveillance of its areas and who is permitted where.' The status of this playful park as a private place described by Bort (2013) begins to capture some of the tensions in how a particular understanding of play is put to use. As well as being a methodological issue

of where external visitors and researchers are able to access, the restrictions on access provide a way in for exploring some of the contractions around these playful interactions.

A further reference to a “playground” in the public presentation of Google comes in relation to the Garage - Google’s “hacker maker design space” (Mamie Rheingold, Developer Relations Program Manager, Google in *Fast Company*, 2013). Within this presentation there are explicit references to playing. In her contribution to the presentation, Nadya Direkova (Design Evangelist) describes how: ‘The garage is kind of like my playground. When you come in you can see that you can write on the tables, you can write on the walls, and then you can reconfigure the tables to be in any position you want—everything is on wheels.’ Through the 1 minute 46 seconds of the video, we see Mamie showing of these wheels, as she pushes around and positions tables, chairs, and sofas. Whilst not a perk in the ways discussed above, they are certainly part of the playful interactions through which Google seeks to develop working relationships and practices. This sense of play is articulated in the following: ‘Alex Cuthbert, who works on user experience design, feels that a sense of play—engineered to break down barriers and encourage creativity—is essential for good work’. The specificities of play are though hard to pin down. What is it about writing on a table and pushing a sofa around on wheels that is playful? The answer to this might centre around experiences of actually being in this environment. The elements that could never be captured and communicated in a short promotional film, but all too apparent to those inhabiting the space. Nevertheless, the question remains as to the understandings of play that are deployed.

In further elaborating on the Garage, Rheingold refers to a ‘commons where googlers can come together across the company to learn, create and make’ (*Fast Company*, 2013). The reference to “commons” highlights how Google’s approach with this space is sharing, rather

than department affiliations. Whilst it is a “Google commons”, it is not a commons in the sense of being publicly shared and equally available. Much like the park, the Garage commons shows how Google enact an idea, configuration and set of relationships – but in a way that seems in tension with other understandings of that source/inspiration. A way to articulate this concern might come with another concept closely linked to the commons – enclosure. The reference to enclosure here does not concern the physical spaces of the garage or the park (see Jakobsson and Stiernstedt, 2010, for an account of the Googleplex within its Silicon Valley context). Rather, we can use enclosure to help consider how Google deploys particular meanings for the playful interactions it advocates. What kinds of particular meanings and understandings of play are constructed and circulated?

Returning to Sørensen and Spoelstra’s (2011, p 294) comments on play as the continuation of work, it is clear that play serves a purpose: ‘play maintains its boundaries and thereby its pure character, though it is designed in such a way that its remnants (creative ideas, group motivation, etc.) are likely to benefit the organization.’ The importance of play for Google is no doubt in how it contributes to creative ideas and group motivation. That said, notions of play’s “pure character” must be understood within specific contexts. How is play (de)constructed and (dis)located?

This sense of the constructed and dislocated has been identified in other aspects of the Googleplex. More specifically, the “monuments” that are located at the Mountain View Googleplex have come under scrutiny. Jakobsson and Stiernstedt (2010, p 130) examine the full scale replica of a T-Rex dinosaur from *Jurassic Park* and a replica of SpaceShipOne (‘the first space plane to complete a privately funded human space flight’). Jakobsson and Stiernstedt (2010, p 127) describe these as ‘large-scale installations, metaphors and

materializations of Google's place in space and time' that contribute to telling the story of Google. They however go on to suggest that:

The dinosaur and the space plane as artifacts, as objects of interior design, are *readymades*. As opposed to what one would spontaneously think of a monument, they are not constructed as site-specific buildings or parts of buildings. Instead, they are objects lifted out of specific contexts (places, times) and put together in Googleplex (Jakobsson and Stiernstedt, 2010, p 127. Emphasis in original)

Jakobsson and Stiernstedt (2010) identify the monuments that make the Googleplex a distinctive and unusual workplace, but go to address how these objects are physically put into and symbolically put to use at the Googleplex. The lifting and then planting of ideas, objects and practices to tell the Google story can also be seen with play.

On the one hand, choice is offered in the customisation and personalisation of space involving children's play. On the other hand, we must pause to further consider which elements of children's play. The expressive possibilities and the extent to which this playful environment is shaped and flavoured by Googlers has been picked up in the public presentations. Under the caption of "be yourself", Hoagland (n.d) describes how 'desktop gizmos and lava lamps express Google's laid-back ethos'. The personalisation of desk spaces with toys and figures from popular culture features widely in the photo tours of Google. For Johnston (2014, p 9), the 'environment is user-driven rather than simply given by the corporation. In a way, the over-all aesthetic connotes "child's play" which is not purposive and goal oriented, but exploratory and pleasurable in itself.' In turn, the questions raised around the readymade monuments of Google invite and encourage us to ask, what versions of "child's play" are lifted into this context?



We would suggest then that Google's play ethos and specific playful environments, objects and behaviours fall under Sutton-Smith's rhetorics of play as *progress* – the ultimate aim is to foster innovative production, and as *imaginary* – harnessing a vision of childhood play in bedrooms and backyards as spontaneous, free and creative. We will now turn to LEGO, a brand dominant in the toy industry for decades, with strong links to educational as well as everyday play, and one with a distinct reputation for creative, open-ended and imaginative play (Giddings, 2017).

### **LEGO serious play**

The appeal of the consultancy programme LEGO Serious Play is in part generated by the tension between work and play. The name itself jams together the Serious and the Playful, and the notion of using these much-loved bricks in the offices and boardrooms of industry has a wry charm: nostalgia for lost time of childhood play and the domestic spaces of bedroom and living room floors and tables. This connection between LEGO Serious Play and everyday play with LEGO in homes and children's bedrooms is clear and intentional. The scheme draws on LEGO's unique status as a product loved for its creative and educational affordances and its role in family life over the generations since its development in Denmark in the 1950s (Lauwaert 2009). Because of this, Serious Play has received a level of popular attention unique for a management training development programme.

LEGO Serious Play was developed in the mid 1990s by the LEGO Group, manufacturers of the popular toys. A trained facilitator leads group building of LEGO models from a specially designed set of bricks. The aim is for groups to represent their workplace structures, roles, relationships, identities and communications metaphorically. As the media scholar David Gauntlett – himself a trained Serious Play facilitator - puts it:

a school would not be constructed as a building with doors and windows, but would be represented with interconnected metaphors such as an owl representing knowledge, flowers representing emotional support, a tower for leadership, and a staircase representing personal growth (Gauntlett, 2014, p. 193-4).

Once these intangible phenomena were 'externalised' in playfully metaphorical models, participants were encouraged to reflect on them, and to use the LEGO bricks to construct alternative models, suggesting new approaches and initiatives.

The popular appeal of LEGO is bound up in the perception that it is amongst the most creative and imaginative toys or games available to children. This is the heart of LEGO's corporate image. The LEGO Group has supported research into play, and its website and publications are characterised by advanced claims for the value of open and imaginative play for children's development. Listing its brand values as 'Imagination, Creativity, Fun, Learning' it has developed, in part through its connections with the LEGO Foundation, an ethos of play for learning that is promoted and pursued in global campaigns and projects (Lachney 2014). LEGO Serious Play builds on this image, research, values, and assumptions about play.

In their book on the Serious Play method in business, Kristiansen and Rasmussen draw on Johan Huizinga's seminal volume on the history and philosophy of play, *Homo Ludens*, to set up a conceptual framework for Serious Play and its relationship with children's play. They argue that children's play can be, and often is, serious and intense. In terms fully compatible with the rhetoric of *play as progress*, they assert that play generally has an underlying developmental function:

We should probably make it clear that *most* play is anything but frivolous. Even the kinds in which we partake when we're young typically have some sort of developmental purpose, even though this purpose typically is not explicitly stated (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014, p 39. Emphasis in original).

The Serious Play method then aims to harness and direct this underlying and natural developmental potential into the work environments of corporate and entrepreneurial strategy: 'play with an explicit purpose [...] to address a real issue for participants around the table by getting them to lean forward, unlock knowledge, and break habitual thinking' (39).

The Serious Play ethos is not a radical break from LEGO as a children's toy, rather it could be seen as a focused application and development of a long-established corporate philosophy. On its website, company reports and in the research it supports, the LEGO Group and the LEGO Foundation set out in detail a consistent philosophy of the value of play:

Playfulness asks what if? and imagines how the ordinary becomes extraordinary, fantasy or fiction. Dreaming it is a first step towards doing it.  
Free play is how children develop their imagination - the foundation for creativity.

As in Serious Play imagination and 'dreaming' are regarded as fundamental to productive thought, learning, and activity:

Creativity is the ability to come up with ideas and things that are new, surprising and valuable. Systematic creativity is a particular form of creativity that combines logic and reasoning with playfulness and imagination.  
([http://www.lego.com/en-gb/aboutus/lego-group/the lego brand](http://www.lego.com/en-gb/aboutus/lego-group/the_lego_brand)).

### **Fault lines in industrial theories of play**

As we noted above, the application of play for the instrumental demands of industry, however open and forward-looking, must at least implicitly establish a distinction between *play as progress* and *play as frivolity*. Given its philosophical ambitions and close association with, and validation from, specific types and locations of children's play (LEGO toys, the home, bedroom floors), Serious Play polices this boundary explicitly. Kristiansen and Rasmussen (2014, p. 122-23) assert that:

there is a clear division between creative imagination, where one focuses on possible realities and the making of reality, and fantasy, the domain of the impossible. When the creative imagination is taken to a negative extreme, we risk indulging in fantasy, the impossible, and the improbable. Strategy makers who lose touch with their experience risk fantasizing.

Though they don't spell it out in these terms, here we see a distinction from the time and place of children's play – an explanation and justification of the application of ostensibly childlike activity to serious adult work. And it returns us to questions about the extent to which the assumptions of play places and play activities – physical and mental – that underpin these business applications are founded on actual everyday play and places. For example, in ethnographic and ecological-psychological studies of children's games, imaginative play is often observed to be characterised by nonsensical action, characters and scenarios rather than the widely-held assumption that in imaginative play children are generally trying out adult roles (pretending to be doctors or parents) (Burns and Richards, 2014; Opie, 1994; Sutton Smith, 1997). Sutton-Smith's *play as frivolity* is ubiquitous and omnipotent in the play of young children - in the playground and with toys. He also describes it as *phantasmagorical*, a term which captures both its fantastical and whimsical manifestations but also the creative impulse that the proponents of industrial play work to isolate and apply. Children's play with toys, their songs and jokes and their playground games are often, and perhaps more often than not, characterised by nonsense, obscenity and figurative violence, monsters and catastrophes. Children's own stories, he notes, 'portray a world of great flux, anarchy and disaster often without resolution', with 'crazy titles, morals, and characters' (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p 161).

Despite its reputation for educational potential, LEGO play does not escape this phantasmagoria, indeed it appears to encourage it. The few ethnographic studies of LEGO

play or construction toy play capture nonsensical worlds and events (e.g. Giddings, 2014b).

For example, this short study of three boys playing with LEGO together soon after a series of riots had hit the headlines in the UK:

J: I only have two people, but they have sticks!

A & N: fighting / shooting / impact noises

N: Is my guy ever going to die?

A: No!

J: This guy dies.

A: This guy's my last rioter...

N: No! No! Not yet! He doesn't die yet!

N: I'll tell you when he can die.

J: There's a fake policeman... Alex, I killed him with his own neon riot stick.

J: You know riot shields? This is what they do...

J: Alex, I'm just beating this guy to death with his own stick!

N: The police have got a robot!

A: Err! Err! Err!

J: It's a bomb disposal... I've beaten him so hard his legs fell off.

J: Grr! The last rioter alive!

(Giddings, 2014a, p 140-141).

This moment of LEGO play is clearly *imaginative*, responsive to real world events and concerns, but its exaggerated violence and surreal juxtapositions could not in any straightforward way be recuperable for productive, reflective, or strategic ends, that is to say it does not feature in LEGO's promotional or training material for Serious Play. Play, these LEGO rioters suggest, is not so easily understood, nor applied – it has its own (il)logics and potentials. The links between play, creativity, and innovation are real, but they are complex and not easily tamed.

Ball-pits and slides recall places and technologies designed and engineered for children's play: public playgrounds and private play centres, IKEA's Småland creche for example, subject to health and safety scrutiny and benign adult surveillance of children's play. LEGO, and Google's toys and race tracks, evoke the domestic space of young children's play with toys: the kitchen

table and lounge or bedroom floor. A space perhaps remembered in adulthood as nostalgic generalities rather than specific recollections of models built, worlds generated, and stories told. These are places separated in time as much as space - a 'lost' time of childhood where play could be utterly absorbing, immersive and unselfconscious.

In both our case studies, there is no mandate to play. There is though the operationalisation of a play culture. There are particular visions of play that operate in public and visible ways, as well as part of a workplace culture and organisational ethos. For Google, it forms part of the start-up enterprise story and it is manifest in certain practices, interactions and ways of working. For LEGO, play, creativity and imagination are the brand and as concepts drive product design, research and charitable activities as well as consultancy programmes such as Serious Play. The LEGO Group's advertising has at times celebrated the open and unfettered imagination its toys afford, but in its more educational and business projects has had to negotiate the fantastical with the instrumental. There are partial and particular uses of play and distinct tensions in which versions of play are put to work and how – and which are not. We have suggested that there is a significant faultline in the mobilisation of ideas of play for creative work: appeals to the creativity and freedom of children's play must be negotiated and filtered, with some aspects of play selected for the ends of entrepreneurial and business, and others downplayed or repressed. At the very least industrial applications of play theories and practices must negotiate the productive application of imaginative play with its ever-present tendency towards frivolity and nonsense. In some respects then, these limit and circumscribe the possibilities of play within innovative work contexts. This might be to ensure that play is productive. There might equally be oversights and assumptions in what play is,

and these potential limitations with how play features within management and enterprise provides us with pathways for further analysis.

## References

- Banks M (2005) Managing creativity in the knowledge economy. in Rooney D, Hearn G and Ninan A (eds), *Handbook on the Knowledge Economy*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp.218-228.
- Bort J (2013) Tour Google's Luxurious 'Googleplex' Campus In California. *Business Insider*. Available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/google-hq-office-tour-2013-10?op=1&IR=T> (accessed 23.03.16).
- Bratton BH (2015) Cloud Megastructures and Platform Utopias. In Gieger J (ed), *Entr'acte: Performing Publics, Pervasive Media, and Architecture*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.35-52.
- Burns A and Richards C (2014) *Children's Games in the New Media Age*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Caldwell J (2007) Critical industrial practice: branding, repurposing, and migratory patterns of industrial texts. *Television and New Media* 7(2): 99-134.
- Channel Four (2015) *The Secret World of Lego*. Broadcast 03.06.15. <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-secret-world-of-lego>
- Christensen PM and O'Brien M (2002) *Children in the City: home, neighbourhood and community*. London: Routledge.
- Cohen D and Mackeith SA (1992) *The Development of Imagination: private worlds of childhood*. London, Routledge.
- Edwards J (2013) Google employees confess about the worst things about working at Google. *Business Insider*. Available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/google-employees-confess-the-worst-things-about-working-at-google-2013-11?IR=T> (accessed 23.03.16).
- Fast Company (2013) How Google's Flexible Workspace Ignites Creative Collaboration (On Wheels)'. Available at: <http://www.fastcompany.com/3017824/work-smart/how-googles-flexible-workspace-ignites-creative-collaboration-on-wheels> (accessed 23.03.16).
- Fleming P (2005) Worker's playtime? Boundaries and cynicism in a "culture of fun" program. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 41(3): 285-303.
- Gauntlett D (2014) The LEGO System as a tool for thinking, creativity, and changing the world. In Wolf MJP (ed) *LEGO Studies: examining the building blocks of a transmedial phenomenon*. New York: Routledge, pp. 189-205.
- Giddings S (2014a) *Gameworlds: virtual media and children's everyday play*. New York: Bloomsbury.



Giddings S (2014b) Bright bricks, dark play: on the impossibility of studying LEGO. In Wolf MJP (ed) *LEGO Studies: examining the building blocks of a transmedial phenomenon*. New York: Routledge, pp., 241-267.

Giddings S (2017) LEGO and LEGO Foundation. In Peppler K (ed) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Out of School Learning*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE, pp. 436-438.

Google (n.d.), 'Our Culture'. Available at: [https://www.google.com/intl/en\\_uk/about/company/facts/culture/](https://www.google.com/intl/en_uk/about/company/facts/culture/) (accessed 23.03.16).

Google (n.d.), 'Locations'. Available at: [https://www.google.com/intl/en\\_uk/about/company/facts/locations/](https://www.google.com/intl/en_uk/about/company/facts/locations/) (accessed 23.03.16).

Gropper CM and Kleiner BH (1992) Making work play. *Work Study* 41(7): 14-16.

Hoagland E (n.d.) Photos: Life in the Googleplex. *Time*. Available at: [http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1947844\\_2013323,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1947844_2013323,00.html) (accessed 23.03.16).

Hjorth D (2004) Creating space for play/invention – concepts of space and organizational entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 16(5): 413-432.

Holt J and Vonderau P (2015) Where the Internet Lives: Data centers as cloud infrastructure. In Parks L and Starosielski N (eds) *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructure*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 71-93.

Hughes K (2001) Dress-down Friday is all washed up. *The Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2001/apr/22/features.review17> (accessed 23.03.16).

Jakobsson P & Stiernstedt F (2010) Googleplex and informational culture. In Riegert K and Ericson S (eds), *Media houses: Architecture, Media, and the Production of Centrality*. New York: Peter Lang, pp.113-136.

Johnston D (2014). Corporate Space, Performance and Selfhood: Googleplex Sydney. *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 10(2). Available online at <http://liminalities.net/10-2/index.html>.

Kane P (2004) *The Play Ethic: a manifesto for a different way of living*. London: Macmillan.

Krempel S and Beyes T (2011) Work = work =/= work: In defence of play. *Ephemera: theory and politics in organization*. 11(4): 466-481.

Kristiansen P and Rasmussen R (2014) *Building a Better Business using the LEGO Serious Play method*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.

Lachney M (2014) Building the LEGO classroom. In Wolf MJP (ed), *LEGO Studies: examining the building blocks of a transmedial phenomenon*. New York: Routledge, pp. 189-205.

Lauwaert M (2009) *The Place of Play: toys and digital cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

LEGO Group (2016), 'The LEGO brand'. Available at: [http://www.lego.com/en-gb/aboutus/lego-group/the lego brand](http://www.lego.com/en-gb/aboutus/lego-group/the_lego_brand) (accessed 1.04.16).

Lutticken S (2006) Playtimes. *New Left Review* 66.

McAveney C (2013) How do you define startup? *Wired*. Available at: <http://www.wired.com/insights/2013/09/how-do-you-define-startup-culture/> (accessed 23.03.16).

Neff G, Wissinger E and Zukin S (2005) Entrepreneurial labor among cultural producers: 'cool' jobs in 'hot' industries. *Social Semiotics* 15(3): 307-334.

Opie I (1994) *The People in the Playground*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schrage MD (1999) *Serious Play: how the world's best companies simulate to innovate*. Boston MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Singh J (2017) Innovation thrives in workplaces where people are given freedom to share ideas and take risks', *Daily Telegraph*. Available at: <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/newslocal/embrace-failure-to-create-a-culture-of-innovation/news-story/552ca5cfefc3095bb0af6f31b07e1398> (accessed 23.09.17).

Sørensen BM and Spoelstra S (2011) Play at work: continuation, intervention and usurpation. *Organisation* 19(1): 81-97.

Sutton-Smith B (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Taylor S (2015) A new mystique? Working for yourself in the neoliberal economy. *The Sociological Review* 63(S1): 174-187.