

International Toy Research Association 8th World Conference
Toys and Material Culture: Hybridisation, Design and Consumption
11-13th July 2018 Paris, France

Work and Play – Experiences in Toy Town

Northampton, England is a town known for its shoe industry, but during the twentieth century it became ‘Toy Town’ (Thomas, 2016) and a centre of innovation in the British toy industry. It remains today a centre of toy distribution and design. The University of Northampton has been working with the town’s industry and organisations, to capture the local history but more importantly to understand the creative value of play in the community (Thomas, 2013).

Starting from the previous research, this paper will explore issues around the links between work and play, through a series of discussions with people working in Toy Town. How do the toys you play with as child lead to a career choice? Is play as ‘a child’s work’ a notion that is being undermined in today’s schools? Does playing games 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? Toy and play related projects at undergraduate level seemed to encourage creativity (Schaber, 2008), has this experience been shared in other disciplines and with more recent cohorts? How have our graduates (Betts, 2007) transferred their skills to the local industry? How is the world of work reflected in toy design today?

Some initial discussions and readings point to a concern that allowing toys and play at work generate noise, distract and are only suited to particular creative industries. Toys for some are a hobby or a private indulgence and not part of their work experience. The value of play debate in early year’s educational circles remains particularly strong. In a similar way, there remain split opinions what is a “good” toy. Some promote those that encourage learning or creativity but deride today’s toys linked to our 21st century connected world (Thomas, 2017). Is that not where the work is today?

The paper sets out to reflect on experience of staff, graduates and local employers and to share some thoughts about work and play. It is a contribution from one University research department in a Toy Town in the UK to another toy research centre.

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Links to main conference themes - Toys and Material Culture: Hybridisation, Design and Consumption.