



Library Hi Tech News

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Megan Lotts , (2016), "Floating castles, Legos, Candy, and Play: Counterplay 2016", Library Hi Tech News, Vol. 33 Iss 5 pp. 18 - 20

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/LHTN-06-2016-0026>

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Floating castles, Legos, Candy, and Play: Counterplay 2016

Megan Lotts

COUNTERPLAY 2016

Upon arriving to Dokk1, located in Aarhus, Denmark, I was overwhelmed by the awesomeness of the architecture and the outdoor play areas sprinkled around this library/community center. The venue was bustling, there were people everywhere using computers, studying, reading, relaxing, playing, chatting and making and enjoying snacks at the coffee shop. There were also individuals lining up at the conference registration table including artists, academics, writers, scientists, musicians, teachers, librarians, architects, art therapists, makers, consultants and more. As this was my first time attending, and the third year for this event, I was excited to learn that the Counterplay 2016 would be taking place throughout the entire space, so there was a potential for a lot of interaction between conference attendants and the general public. I was not sure what to expect, I had never been to a conference in which some of the presentations and workshops were open to the public. But it was obvious to me that Dokk1 was a great space for this conference, in part, because of the grandeur of the library, but really because of the endless learning opportunities and the potential to engage within this library.

The event started off with the traditional welcome speech by conference coordinator Mathias Poulson, sharing the logistics for conference, a few ideas to think about and quickly got down to the business of play. Following Poulson's introduction, Keynote Speaker Raymond van Driel took the stage and I found myself clapping my hands, stomping my feet and yelling out answers, right and wrong, to questions posed to the audience. I found van Driel's active and engaging presentation a great way to start the conference and I was most intrigued by his discussion of play factors and a model for play. When it comes to play van Driel noted, we need to help each other play. This

includes giving ourselves permission, finding courage and embracing a playful mindset[1]. Although these ideas seem simple, as I grow older I find it more difficult to make time to play. I feel pressure from everyday life and work responsibilities, and I am too caught up in what my colleagues might think, and how play will benefit my tenure case. But I love to play. It soothes my soul, it is evident in my research, and I believe it to be a powerful tool that libraries can use to embrace creative and multi-disciplinary learning as well as be a catalyst for engagement and community building. So why am I not allowing or providing myself this everyday life need?

In a recent post reflecting back on the conference, Poulson discusses the ideas of a playful atmosphere and how this is crucial for this conference to have a lasting impact. He points to the work of Stuart Brown, who states: "Probably the biggest roadblock to play for adults is the worry that they will look silly, undignified or dumb if they allow themselves to truly play. Or they think that it is irresponsible, immature and childish to give themselves regularly over to play[2]". With Brown and van Driel in mind, I concluded that perhaps part of the problem is that I am not giving myself permission to play and that I am too afraid to be judged from acting silly. At dinner, I was reminded by a fellow conference participant that it is not about finding time to play. It is about making your everyday life and how you engage with your work and peers, a creative and playful experience. Van Driel also pointed out that there are certain factors that can help us play and that is to be present, leap into things and be prepared to make mistakes. Be adaptive, there will always be changes and barriers with any task, so consider taking a "yes" approach as opposed to worrying about what might go wrong. But most important in play, you must have

courage, be bold, be passionate and be engaged.

One of the biggest problems with play is that it is hard to define. You know it when you see it or feel it and you can make a list of emotions that can occur when playing, yet that still does not define it. When I looked up play in the online version of Merriam-Webster, the definition eluded to the idea of play as a noun and pertaining specifically to games[3]. Dictionary.com also viewed play as a noun, but did not focus completely on its relation to games and also provided a more action-based definition[4]. I believe play can happen in many formats. I think of play as a verb, sometimes an ephemeral experience or a mantra/way of life. For me, play involves action and amusement. It can take place in a singular or community environment, it can be quiet or loud and is an activity in which one learns by doing. Play is contagious and a medium that exercises creativity and problem-solving skills which are also skills needed when searching for or creating scholarly research.

Happenings, presentations and workshops

There was one problem with this conference, as with many, and that was choosing what to attend. The first workshop I attended was led by Stine Liv Johansen and Helle Skovbjerg. The workshop was a mix of short five-minute power-point presentations intertwined with active learning, group work and a lot of fun. There were 16 participants in the workshop and we lined up by height, shortest to tallest, and then counted off in four's to find our groups. As a group, we were charged with creating a game and then implementing it somewhere within or outside of Dokk1. As we got into our groups, we shared who we were and quickly started brainstorming because we

only had 30 minutes to complete this task. When we started this task, I was feeling a bit anxious. I was meeting the people in my group for the first time, I did not know their skill sets, and I was worried how would we work together to complete this task. Also at this point, I had not taken the opportunity to fully wander around Dokk1 to see the space, to know what our options were, so I felt unprepared. I think what I was feeling is natural and probably emotions many people have when initially working in groups. But within minutes of working as a team, I was feeling a decrease of stress, and I was beginning to play and have fun. By the end of 30 minutes, I had been laughing, drawing, moving and having fun with my fellow group members. We had completed our task, an exquisite corpse like drawing game, and I was feeling no stress. After completing the task, all the groups came back to the workshop room and began discussing what had happened. I found myself amazed, impressed and inspired by what all the groups had done. One group created a packman game in a maze like portion of Dokk1. Another group played on the front stairs, creating and working with movement games. While the final group created a selfie game, crossed with a light version of hide and seek, including posting hilarious bad selfies to the conference tweeter feed using their mobile devices that many of us carry everywhere. Reflecting back, now, I am sure I was not the only one who initially felt a bit out of their comfort zone, but it was obvious from all the interesting games that were created, this did not last long for anyone. When groups explained their games, I could feel and hear the excitement in the voices. How much fun they had creating their games and how much all of us learned along the way. We discovered more about ourselves, other group members and how easy and productive play can be. To me it was obvious that working and playing in groups encouraged individuals to be adaptable, creative, innovative and fearless which can be beneficial for any organization.

Throughout the conference, I met many interesting scholars, participated in many playful learning activities, but one of my favorite presentations was by Kate Langham titled, *Play as a Design Tool: Playful Design Methodologies*[5]. I was

fortunate to meet and work with Kate while attending the workshop mentioned in the previous paragraph and I was curious about her research because of my own experiences with playful data collection. When she began her presentation, she talked about 1947 post-war playgrounds in Amsterdam and how these cities had to reconnect community members to green spaces and spending time outdoors. She shared background details about playful data gathering and design methodologies, as well as her own ideas on the topic. Lastly, she presented her own research project in which she used candy, cookies and sweets, to create a new design for the Springfield Recreation Ground, a park located in Corsham, Wiltshire. Prior to this project, this park had become run down and was in need of a revitalization. Some individuals felt uncomfortable using certain areas of the park because of the skate-boarders and their unsavory characteristics. Also the skate-boarders were uncomfortable being judged by individuals who did not take the time to get to know them. Langham described the process she used when working with nine focus groups including children and adults. She shared spectacular images and stories of how focus group participants used the candy to create a vision and map for the park. But what I found most fascinating about Langham's research project was, although the intent was to create a park for the people, what really happened as she created a community by giving individuals the permission and the space to play together. One could also conclude that in the end, the design for the park became secondary. In the focus groups, participants learned more about each other and realized that even though they may have thought prior to the project, they did not have anything in common; this was not truly the case. The focus groups were about creating a safe space for individuals to play and learn more about communicating and engaging with each other while learning more about the needs of the community that would eventually use this park. In short, Langham was able to use playful data collection to design a park, as well as create an all-inclusive safe space where community members can gather and engage in a playful social exchange.

I also had the opportunity to present my own research in a workshop

titled, "Playing with Lego®, Making campus connections, and Going Mobile". The workshop was a hybrid powerpoint presentation and hands on Lego workshop in which I discussed my research about the Rutgers Art Library Lego Playing Station and the #LeGOMAKE tour. I began by briefly presenting background information about pop-up making and makerspaces in academic libraries, but mainly focused on how active learning and play can help individuals embrace creative thinking and problem solving skills and does not need to cost a lot of money. I spoke about the Rutgers Art Library Lego Playing Station having hosted over 45 engaging events for a total cost of less than \$100, including crowd-sourcing and rescuing over 300 pounds of Lego bricks from the landfill. The events based around this station have had a lasting impact on the art library and have also formed tighter bonds with the individuals with whom I liaise, including Mason Gross Visual Artists, Landscape Architecture Department and many other departments from the Rutgers campuses. I also spoke about the #LeGOMAKE tour I completed in Fall 2015 in which I visited 20 public academic research libraries, traveling 5,675 miles in six weeks with 100 pounds of Lego bricks to facilitate workshops with academic library faculty and staff. These workshops provided participants the opportunity to experience a low-cost, pop-up-making space that exercised their creative and problem-solving skills in a community setting. Following the workshops, individuals were invited to talk about their experience and fill out a six-question survey. From the results of this study, faculty and staff in academic libraries expressed how much they enjoyed working in groups in a creative fashion and would like more opportunity to innovate and engage with their colleagues in a playful manner. Also, participants were able to address difficult issues and problems in creative new ways and liked having fun at work. At Counterplay, individuals who participated in my workshop had similar experiences, see [Plate 1](#). Most individuals enjoyed working in groups, met new people and made new friends. Because individuals were working with toys in a group setting, they were able to give themselves permission to play, and, therefore, learning

Plate 1. *Counterplay 2016, playing with Lego®, making campus connections, and going mobile workshop*



Source: Photo credit M Lotts

more about themselves, their peers and the real life problems they were solving with Lego bricks. In short, making activities allow individuals to cultivate their creative side, come up with innovative ideas and harness problem-solving skills in a playful manner. Lego bricks are a cultural icon and toy that many individuals are familiar with and can use to create models, to tell stories, to illustrate ideas or solve major problems. Similar to the candy Langham used in her focus groups, Legos evoke a playful mind-set that allow individuals to relax, let go and not be afraid to sit down at the table and have a conversation.

This conference was about play, so there was no shortage of engaging events or opportunities to play and make. Besides the speaker and workshops happening, there was also a play space chalked full of events in which anyone, including the public, could participate. Play space opportunities included building robots, drawing, creating with cardboard, learning more about the coding pirates or working with a secret club to help them build “Castles in the Sky”, a floating castle made of paper (Plate 2) or making “Jubies”, a mobile game where players work together to create a story by interacting remotely, not seeing or speaking with their partner until after the story is completed[6].

But what did I really learn from this conference? First, play can be all inclusive and you do not need a lot of money. Play and creativity is a way of seeing and even if you are play insecure, find playful activities or games that work for you. Be present, passionate and adaptable, and do not be afraid to act silly or look like a fool. Remember life is

Plate 2. *Castles in the sky by a secret club*



Source: Photo credit A Secret Club

about learning, and failing can be the best life lesson of all.

One must never give up, keep trying. If you find yourself in an environment in which play is frowned upon and failure is not accepted, find a way to educate the naysayers. Play embraces active learning, fosters creative thinking skills and can make one happy. In a presentation by multi-media artist, Dr Tine Bech, told a story about a family trying out one of her multi-disciplinary projects in which participants were required to put on a cape that tracked movement, was augmented with radio frequency identification (RFID) and created sound. The father did not like the idea of wearing this silly garment but went along with it anyway. Upon coming out of experience, he was laughing and smiling and stated, “I had so much fun, I forgot to be embarrassed”. It is important to recognize that sometimes play forces you to get out of your comfort zone but can also be a great way to communicate as well as learn more about our individual selves.

As an academic librarian, I believe that libraries can greatly benefit from incorporating play into their organizations. Play is a form of active learning that promotes innovative thinking and cross-disciplinary collaboration which is needed both by library patrons and employees. The academic landscape is shifting, and if libraries want to stay relevant, we need to be more creative in how we engage our patrons and how we cultivate partnerships throughout our campuses. Play can help us better understand the needs of our communities as well as provide new and exciting ways to collect and work with data. Play encourages innovation and creativity within libraries by

fostering community and providing new fun ways in which we can work and communicate.

As noted in the beginning of this article, the opening Keynote Speaker Raymond van Driel did not just tell us what he thought about play, he engaged the audience with active questions and provided us with the example of play. He set the tone for the conference. He showed the audience how easy it can be to stand on a stage and meaningfully engage a group of 170 people in an active and playful manner. I left this conference being reminded that as an academic and human being, I need to let go and not take myself so seriously. I need to allow myself to play more and remember that amusing activities and engaging learning can lead to innovation, cross-disciplinary collaboration and foster-lifelong learning. Ideas, work and life are meant to be fluid and play can be that change agent that helps foster creativity and innovation within oneself and organizations.

If you want to learn more about Counterplay, visit their website at www.counterplay.org/. If you would like to see pictures or learn more about the Counterplay 2016 conference, visit www.counterplay.org/counterplay-16/ which includes the program, testimonials and materials provided by presenters from the conference. You can also visit the conference twitter feed at #Counterplay16 which really captured the magic happening at Dokk1 in Aarhus during March 14-16, 2016.

NOTES

- 1 www.counterplay.org/presentations/Raymond_vanDriel.pdf
- 2 www.amazon.com/Play-Shapes-Brain-Imagination-Invigorates/dp/1583333789 and www.counterplay.org/a-playful-atmosphere/
- 3 www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/play
- 4 www.dictionary.com/browse/play?s=t
- 5 www.counterplay.org/presentations/Kate_Langham.pdf
- 6 www.counterplay.org/timetable/#event-142

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