

054: Foreign policy

Claystation

Creative play.

Text <Andy Polaine>



Most designers and artists would describe themselves as creative and playful, but this sometimes leads to creativity not being taken seriously. At best this manifests in others telling us how lucky we are to be doing something we love; at worst that misconception of good fortune is often an excuse for poor pay. The unspoken part of this argument is that creativity and playfulness are just about messing around, not to be taken seriously. Ben Hughes disagrees and uses four days and a quarter-ton of clay to prove it.

→ Hughes trained as an industrial designer, has worked in the UK, Australia and Taiwan and is course director of the MA in industrial design at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, part of the University of the Arts London. Hughes is also part of a group called the Design Transformation Group (DTG), which formed in 1995 "to stimulate and challenge the corporate, professional and academic worlds that collectively shape our future," he explains. "It is a non-profit organisation, with a pretty light infrastructure. It has involved many different people over the years: artists, designers of all disciplines, philosophers, scientists, architects, engineers. There is a shifting membership, which I rather like. It basically involves anyone who wants to get involved."

→ Events form the centre of the DTG's activities, often taking groups of people (from designers to big-business CEOs) out of their normal environments and encouraging them to rethink their creative processes. "These events tend to be concerned with the exploration of creativity

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and innovation techniques including Situationist theory, chaos, chance, constellation and play," says Hughes. "Some people don't know quite what to make of the DTG. It worries them. I like that."

→ Claystation <www.claystation.org> was a recent event that Hughes developed along with Cristiaan de Groot and Alex Milton as part of Designersblock <www.designersblock.org.uk> in the UK. The idea is simple – a collaborative, mass-participation claymation animation. The simple set-up consisted of a big stage with a digital camera pointing at it, a laptop, a screen to show the 'rushes' and "a lot of excited people," says Hughes. The camera took one picture every 60 seconds and over the four days they ended up with over five minutes of animation with nary a hand in sight. Quite an achievement for a bunch of amateur animators.

→ Described as a "great British success story" by Design Week, Designersblock was the perfect venue for such an experiment. Established by Piers Roberts and Rory Dodd in 1998 it has hosted annual events since 2002. "These guys do the most amazing job of promoting design talent," says Hughes. "Their events are the complete antidote to the sort of 'in your face' corporate design shows that most people are familiar with. They generally use semi-derelict or pre-gentrified spaces in major cities like London and Milan, get together the best of young, innovative, experimental, dynamic design and create really atmospheric and enjoyable shows.



They have a desire to involve their audience and make them feel part of the whole experience and are happy to involve work with a degree of interactivity."

→ Designersblock 2004 (23 to 26 September in the Farmiloes Building, London) will see the second incarnation of Claystation. This time participants will be rebuilding and remodelling Central London on a scaled map of the area.

"Each individual's work will link and relate to everyone else's as before, but on a slightly different level," says Hughes. "We anticipate some people making models of existing buildings, or designing their own. People will be free to model people, cars, giant lizards etc., except they will be confined to a randomly assigned area of the map. I am looking forward to a Swiss-chalet-style St Paul's."

→ Hughes, Milton and de Groot chose plasticine over other media because of its ease of use and its ability to turn adults into children. "Plasticine is something which many people remember from their childhood," says Hughes. "It is synonymous with play. The smell and texture is pretty nasty, but quite evocative. I think people feel that they can play when they have a lump of plasticine in their hands."

→ Playing is something that Hughes feels many designers do not do enough of because of the pressure to come up with more structured approaches. "Play and creativity are inextricably linked in my experience," he says. "I find that many designers talk about play, but don't really have the understanding of what this might entail. It can be quite hard work. I find the endless dissection of professional design process tedious and ultimately rather pointless. Most creativity techniques strike me as being tailored towards a left-brain audience. Designers generally take this stuff for granted. Play is much closer to their process in my opinion."

→ "Play is a dodgy concept in a corporate context. You don't want to tell a client that you devised his latest packaging concept by daydreaming. It is much more acceptable to dress it up in the trappings of an orderly, systematic approach. Play demands creative engagement. It is all about 'What if? How about?' You can't live your whole life in this state, but if you don't play a little, you will never think of anything new."

→ Hughes refers to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow' for a deeper explanation of the state of play. Over the last 30 years Csikszentmihalyi has researched the mental state achieved when an activity is intrinsically satisfying in and of itself, where the goals and the process merge and one feels a sense of flow. Flow is commonly experienced during play, but as we grow up we are told that play is childish and there is little time or space for play in adult life.

→ "I guess one of the problems is the absence of an adequate definition," says Hughes. "There are many strands to the word 'play', not all of which are relevant; that is why I try and link it to the concept of 'flow'. Play should be engaging and fun. What the hell is 'fun'? That's a good question. I believe that we will see an increasing number of interface and interaction designs that incorporate



a model of play. A successful piece of industrial design has to work from a system's point of view, but there is no reason why a system can't incorporate play to some degree. I can offer the following definition of play from one of my colleagues, Jane Graves, a psychoanalytical psychotherapist: '[play is] a spontaneous response to organising our experience mentally with minimum inconvenience to ourselves. But absolutely essential to our mental health. It is from play we learn to think.' ●

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Related links:

[<www.claystation.org>](http://www.claystation.org)

[<www.designersblock.org.uk>](http://www.designersblock.org.uk)

[<www.mainindustrialdesign.com>](http://www.mainindustrialdesign.com)