



*Chuck out the rules, get creative and take a tip from your kids – it's time to relearn how to have fun. Futurist Pat Kane says play could be one of life's most crucial building blocks. Lego anyone? By David Astle.*

# GAMIE PLAN

**L**ego block by Lego block, my hallway is turning into the Lost City of Alakazoo. I made that name up but the kids don't care. The city is theirs – they made it, that's enough. My children – aged nine and seven – are knocking skulls with their cousins of roughly the same age, raking the Lego bucket in search of that perfect piece. Click.

Patterns emerge but that's an adult talking. This is play, after all, not Urban Design 101. Let Alakazoo sprawl where it will. If the city's rocket depot is pink, let it be pink. In play, there are no rules from above. The make-believe city develops ad hoc.

Game theorists would call it engagement, a style of play given to interaction rather than outcome. Kids are brilliant at it – they mix as equals. They co-operate, experiment, adapt. They improvise and imagine. They allow the game to shape itself. And, ideally, they pack up before dinnertime.

As adults, we lose sight of play in so many ways. Maybe you nurse an Xbox vice or go for a spot of pub trivia on a Wednesday night but the days of spontaneous play seem to evaporate after 25. Travel might be seen as one big hide-and-seek across three continents but once the backpack is stowed, it's work and mortgage for so many Australians. We narrow our lives along fixed paths and neglect the art of fun, of freely engaging with each other. In short, we play less. And guess who loses out?

This is not a story about throwing a Frisbee at lunchtime or face-painting with the kids. It's deeper than that. Play is more a state of mind, a joyous state of readiness, an appetite for new challenges. Think of play not as the opposite of work but the opposite of depression and inaction.

Futurist Pat Kane is a founding editor of Scotland's *Sunday Herald*, the author of *The Play Ethic* and a mischief-maker of the revolutionary kind. He describes the need to "take reality lightly", to see all of life's structures – from work to school to rocket depots – as changeable.

"Let's play, Dad," says Kane's seven-year-old daughter. The game is dolls, the command universal. "What she's requesting," says Kane, "is my participation in a world defined by imagination and empathy, by rules mutually invented and then mutually agreed, and by my free commitment. No wonder many adults have problems truly playing with their children..." And no wonder we sometimes struggle to cope in the madness of modern living.

Let's face it – your dad probably didn't undergo three career changes by the time you left high school. Now, that's more and more the reality. Changes come so quickly in our lives they almost seem haphazard. But according to Kane, only those of us immersed in play-mode will cope. Hewlett-Packard, in its funky TV ads, tells us to "invent". Pat Kane, in his book, dares us to reinvent. The world is in flux and only the playful – the flexible, the reinventive – will be the new game's equal.

The word “play” comes from the Celtic root of “dleigh”, meaning “to engage oneself”. Child’s play is broken into three types: engagement, risk-taking and competition. Play, as a lifestyle, embraces all these without a skipping-rope in sight. Play, says Kane, celebrates adaptability and potential and employers are now getting in on the act. The challenge for any company is to create as much meaning for their employees as financial benefits. Forget unlimited expenses. Fun, engagement and purpose represent the new rewards.

Alakazoo is sprawling into the kitchen now. It was built on trust and consent, with open dialogue and shared resources (namely a Lego bucket). Christine Keogh, a Melbourne drama therapist who works with abused children, has nothing but praise for the likes of Alakazoo. “Only when we play – or when we create – are we truly ourselves,” she says. “Yet we denigrate play unless it’s hard and fast: serious, macho pursuits. Play is marginalised because it’s called play.”

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When not working with kids, Keogh is part of an improvisational theatre crew, Troupe du Jour, which leads corporate workshops with the likes of Ford, Myer, the National Australia Bank and Telstra, touching on the benefits of imaginative thinking.

“When I do workshops with business,” says Keogh, “I call it management development. And when I do it with kids, I call it drama therapy – it’s the same thing.”

Make offers. Accept. Adapt. Don’t block, hog or wimp out. These are some of the “rules” of Troupe’s sessions and essentially the rules of play. Think of the best games you played as a kid – or the best work-teams you were part of – and those same principles resonate. Troupe might ask a team to build a sentence – a word at a time and quickly. Status quickly evaporates; team goals strengthen. Co-operation emerges as the only way to survive.

Not to be outplayed, Lego – which means “play well” in Danish and “connect” in Latin – has invented “Serious Play”, a strategic workshop for adults. Using the same bright bricks found in your average toy box, execs and the mailroom boy can roll up sleeves and connect as equals. In 2002, Carlton & United Breweries invited publicans from across the country to express their ideas on the beer industry, using these same bricks. Creations such as rampaging elephants launched real and positive discussions.

“Puritans have been telling us since the Reformation,” writes Kane, “that play is at best trivial, at worst demonic and at the very least not work. And if we use the word to describe the boundary-challenging, reality-defying, insanely optimistic, relentlessly experimental activity of children, then we usually think we know what we mean by play.”

German philosopher Johan Huizinga calls this state of positive buoyancy “child-ness” versus childishness. We are rich with our own ideas but open to offers. “The work ethic has dominated the last three centuries,” writes Kane, “and it’s ill-equipped to deal with the modern world.”

Kane’s own father was overjoyed when faced with retrenchment; finally the wages clerk could indulge his love of music and the son sensed the universe turn. Play and work, he realised, might operate in concert.

Play finds us at our most plastic – and not in that hard-baked Lego way. It is, writes Kane, “about being

cool about possibilities opening and closing, things starting and failing.” And not being scared to fail.

Last year, *Fast Company* magazine crowned W.L. Gore as America’s most innovative company. Making Gore-Tex raincoats, heart patches and guitar strings, the fabric company operates with minimal hierarchy, encourages risk-taking and learns from failure. In the spirit of Alakazoo, no one has a supervisor – only a core team of six peers.

Other companies, mainly a cluster in Silicon Valley, are introducing non-directional Fridays, where pressing projects are allowed to lapse for a day and workers spend time experimenting and problem-solving. With the heat off, invention flourishes.

Yet a playful office need not be a wacky one. “A real player’s workplace,” says Kane, “is much more like an open campus than a frantic and jolly workhouse.” Forget your PlayStation in the lunchroom and think more an energy and levity in the building, fed by a sense of fairness and belonging. It’s not play hard but play well.

Dinner’s on the table. The kids are destroying some kind of torture chamber under Alakazoo’s main fortress. “You want us to pack it up?” asks Jack, the more diligent of the two nephews. “Nah,” I say. “Leave it there, mate. The grown-ups might invent something from the ruins.” ●

## How to be a player: a 10-step guide

**1 Take reality lightly.** This doesn’t mean living in fantasy land. But it does mean striving to see work, relationships and technology as changeable rather than grimly determined.

**2 Have children – or be around them – at various ages and stages.** Respect their strivings and learn from their playful energies.

**3 Play the lottery and plan your future.** Gambling is about allowing the gods of chance to play with you: scenario planning is about playing God over your own life. Do one directly after the other.

**4 Take this job ... and rise above it.** If you haven’t found the job you love yet, keep imagining that productive and creative future you want for yourself, even in the midst of the most oppressive tedium.

**5 Build your networks.** Use the internet and as much free time as you can manage to connect yourself to people who are passionately interested in specific things that are relevant to your life journey.

**6 Never pass up the chance to experience something crazy or challenging.** It’s a big globalised world out there – and the more you can play with your basic terms of reference, the better prepared you’ll be for the next shift or change in society.

**7 Get broadband, become wireless.** The web is your global playground – use it.

**8 Be an unashamed amateur at something.** Esteem your hobbies: be a Jill or Jack of all the trades you’d like to try. (Music is particularly good for the health of a player’s synapses.)

**9 Extend the playground.** Support campaigns and politicians that look at reducing working hours, extending parental and sabbatical leave and offering free grants for education and the arts.

**10 Attend to your resources.** Play creates energy but it also requires it. So burn off as much as you ingest; deploy whatever mind therapies are required to keep eternal sunshine on your spotless mind; laugh and flirt and have as much sex as you can. And that’s an order! *Pat Kane*