

VIEWPOINT:



THE
PLAY
ISSUE

GLORY
DAZE

The past is a foreign
country - why do we
keep going there?

BITS, BYTES
& BODIES

Our data identities
and how we
will use them

FAT IS
A CLASSIST
ISSUE

Could too many fries
lower your
social standing?

HOUSE OF FUN

A counter to economic gloom? A new need for the witty? Design is losing its seriousness and is getting playful and interactive. From spinning-top chairs in the V&A in London to miniature edible furniture in Paris, ANNA SANSOM joins in with the japes



The Room by Joey Ho
The challenge was the creation of an overall spatial experience that conveys sophistication yet affordability for this single-room Hong Kong restaurant. To go beyond the physical limitations of the restaurant's size, Ho took inspiration from the Dutch artist MC Escher, to transform the 'room' into an engaging venue.
joeyhodesign.com

Design has become so omnipresent that many consumers and designers have become bored by or blasé about the abundance of objects surrounding us. One sure way for designers to differentiate their products, reignite passion and attract attention is by offering a something witty

Visitors to the London Design Festival were greeted with a snazzy version of a chocolate treasure hunt at The Dock, Tom Dixon's showroom/shop/restaurant space at Portobello Dock. Adorning one wall was Gift, a mosaic by the British designer Paul Cockledge in the form of a gigantic QR code assembled from thousands of small chocolates, courtesy of Hotel Chocolat. Participants who scanned the code with their smartphones received a digital voucher for a complimentary box of

chocolates to be collected from the company's flagship store in Covent Garden. Gift was one of four collaborative pieces between a designer and a chocolatier to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the festival.

'It was quite playful – people would scan it and interact with the piece. They'd then go on a journey across London to be presented with their box of chocolates. So it wasn't just about looking, it was about taking part in something,' says Cockledge.

The incentive of a reward won through participation resonates with certain childhood games, such as hunting in the garden for Easter eggs. People were awarded a box of chocolates, but only if they made the physical effort of going to Hotel Chocolat's store.

Playfulness in food design featured in the Paris des Chefs event at the Maison & Objet home interiors trade show in 2011. Designers Humberto and Fernando Campana teamed up on stage with the Brazilian chef Alex Atala, who made a caramel paste, which is widely used in Brazil, especially for children's birthdays. Humberto constructed a tiny chair while Fernando created a miniature basket.

For the Campanas, known for their eco-friendly furniture made from recycled materials and for their cuddly toys, the collaboration stimulated a new train of thought. 'We might like to make eatable prototypes and do a dinner of dégustation – each person would digest the prototype of a chair and we'd get new ideas.'

DESIGN TO DIFFERENTIATE

Design has become so omnipresent that many consumers and designers have become bored by or blasé about the abundance of objects surrounding us. One sure way for designers to differentiate their products, reignite passion and attract the public's attention is by offering something witty. 'The public wants to be challenged and really wants designers to push further and create things that they haven't seen before,' Cockledge observes. 'A lot of boxes have already been ticked for objects – there's so much fantastic design and so much functional design – and I think the idea of a slight twist to normality is quite refreshing.'

The success of Heatherwick Studio's exhibition at London's Victoria and Albert Museum underlined the popularity of the play-in-design trend. In the foyer of the museum, visitors could spin around on Thomas Heatherwick's Spun chairs, modelled on spinning tops. Heatherwick has been sending out unusual, handmade Christmas cards for the past 17 years, which sometimes puzzle recipients, and which always include a stamp or stamps. At the exhibition, stamps were displayed



inside small blocks of plastic, along with an example of his Christmas cards. 'This card is about looking at the least you could possibly send someone,' Heatherwick explained. 'And there's a stamp because a stamp is essential.'

Design-with-a-twist is what defines pieces such as the 13°, 60°, 104° Wine Decanter by Jim Rokos, which won a 2012 Red Dot award. The decanter can be positioned at an oblique angle when its contents have been partially drunk, and rests on its side when all the wine has gone. Its movement reflects the behaviour of drinkers as an evening wears on. 'It's a story about the decanter getting drunker and about getting oxygen into the wine because the design encourages people to move the decanter around,' Rokos explains. 'When you're trying to do something new, it ends up being fun because you're pushing the ordinary boundaries.'

Similarly, Psalt Design – a young studio set up by Tom McKeown, Richard Bell and David Powell – has brought out its Bubble Tank fish bowl, part of which slopes off a piece of furniture. 'The form came as a response to experimenting with Magic Plastic, a plastic balloon kit that I bought one day at a toy shop,' explains Bell. 'I think working on things that are fun and enjoyable can really help create some great concepts for a product.'

SMILE (AND THE WORLD SMILES WITH YOU)

Humour is being used as a direct means of reaching out to customers. 'As a designer, you're throwing out a ball and someone catches it to get that humour,' says Reiko Kaneko, whose BA dissertation at Central St Martins was on wit and humour in design. Her designs include Breakfast Express – an egg cup, toast rack, and salt and pepper receptacles made from fine bone china and presented on toy train-like carriages. There's also a set of Jumpy mugs, where animals or athletes hurdle through the handle. 'It's about converting playfulness into communication,' says Kaneko.

The element of playfulness is not limited to product and food design, of course, but also extends to fashion and merchandising. At the Hermès flagship store on rue de Sèvres in Paris, a miscellany of animal sculptures including giraffes, camels, monkeys and geese have been ransacking the window displays throughout the year. 'I've made an invaded apartment that's being destroyed by animals,' enthuses French artist Jean-François Fourtou about his installations.

Besides the desire to appeal to ever-more demanding customers, there are several other reasons for the growing diversity of expression of play in design. Richard Bell, who studied furniture and product design at

Opposite: Mould in Motion by ECAL/Philipp Grundhöfer (photography by ECAL/Nicolas Genta)

Above: Spun chair by Thomas Heatherwick, heatherwick.com



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The Grid sofa by Kim HyunJoo references blocks and Tetris in bright, highly saturated colour
kimhyunjoo.com

Sheffield Hallam University, thinks the development of university courses has played a role. 'We had a lot of freedom to work on conceptual projects where the idea, experimentation and journey you went on was as important as the manufacture of the final prototype,' he says.

Bell also observes that, during the recession, consumers need to feel that they would truly like something, and that they will value it, if they are to dip into their pockets. 'In the recession, it is more important than ever to create products that people want to buy and have in their home. All of our products are made in the UK and I think things like this can help make the difference.'

RE-MAKING IS FUN

Designers themselves are also feeling the pinch during the economic downturn and some are turning to recycling rather than buying new materials. 'In Spain, because

people are more economical and are looking at alternatives, they tend to recycle and squeeze every last drop out of everything they have,' says Remi Melander from System Design Studio in Barcelona, which has made lamps from recycled cigarette lighters and water bottles. 'If you're taking materials that are old and ugly, it is important to put in emotion and playfulness in order to make recycled design appealing so that it's easier to open the eyes of the spectator.'

Similarly, Furniture Magpies in High Wycombe, UK, has been set up by recent graduates Sua Lee and Nessa Doran O'Reilly who reassemble parts of second-hand furniture to make new, quirky pieces. One example is the Fido occasional table and light - an anglepoise lamp attached to the seat of a dining-room chair to loosely evoke a dog. The lamp can be angled over the arm of a sofa when the user



The Architecture for Dogs projects allows canines to play alongside their humans. Architects and designers including Kengo Kuma, Toyo Ito, Shigeru Ban, MVRDV and Konstantin Grcic have designed a series of downloadable architectural structures that are just for dogs
architecturefordogs.com
Photography by Hiroshi Yoda

is reading, giving the impression that 'Fido' is peering at his owner. 'The whole idea was to rescue furniture and make something that people could relate to and build a relationship with,' says O'Reilly. 'A lot of beautiful furniture was being thrown away and scrapped all the time because nobody was buying it. There was so much around that we could make contemporary and more accessible to the modern consumer. Play is very important for all our pieces, so they have a lot of humour and character in them.'

Other designers are also using their initiative to recuperate discarded objects and give them a second life. Cocksedge's iPhone speakers, Change the Record, are made from old 12-inch vinyl records which are heated, moulded and pressed into the shape of a speaker. 'We pick up the records that no-one's buying and create a new life for them,' says Cocksedge. 'It's exactly the same material but shaped differently. I think the link to the music from the record and the fact that it's supporting a new technology is what people would enjoy.'

It was important for Cocksedge to have fun with the creative process too. 'If I heated it and pushed it to its limit, I'm really, really stretching the record,' he adds. 'Last year, we did an event where we invited people to bring their own old records. We transformed the records in front of their eyes and this was such a fun event and was like a mini design process.'

NEW STIMULATION

The spectrum of design is becoming a playground for products that have the potential to shake consumers out of the doom and gloom of the recession. Playfulness can make something seem more accessible and friendly by offering an interactive form of engagement. The economic cheerlessness has affected nearly everyone and, for designers and consumers alike, the injection of a dose of playfulness into the creative process is attractive. In an increasingly competitive market, objects that can tantalise consumers are more likely to make an impact.

'Desirable design is very much dependent on an object or a product possessing qualities that make you want to touch it or interact with it,' says Michael





Experimenting with artisanal techniques is exemplified by the work of Anton Alvarez, a young Swedish-Chilean designer. Alvarez has made a machine that spins yarns of coloured threads around wooden tables and benches, creating zigzagging, energetic patterns
antonalvarez.com

Czerwinski, a design curator at the Design Museum in London. 'When design works well, and Apple's products are testament to this, they aren't just beautiful, they are also things that you want to pick up.'

British designer Simon Hasan, for example, drapes brown leather onto pieces of furniture, lending a sense of tactile fluidity reminiscent of a leather jacket being thrown onto a surface. 'He understands that for a stool or a chair to stand out and to compete with all the millions of alternatives, then you've got to use materials in a way that makes you want to handle them,' says Czerwinski. 'This playfulness challenges your preconceived idea of what you're looking at, lures you towards the product and makes you want to touch it and experience it.'

Consumers have become more discerning and demanding, having a greater need to be stimulated. The launch of products such as the iPhone and the iPad has made us aware that we can all enjoy intelligent, playful and well-designed products. This has created a sense of entitlement and discernment that was previously the preserve of the privileged few. We're continuously seeking more from our products, wanting them to express more personality, amusement and engagement. We're after things that appeal to more of our senses - which are tactile and fun to use as well as being aesthetically stylish.

'Just messing about with different apps - adding, exploring and trying - has a strong playful element. These characteristics were generally only available to a limited audience before smart mobile digital devices became ubiquitous,' says Uri Baruchin, a strategy director at The Partners, a brand, strategy and design innovation agency in London. 'The fact that casual gaming apps are at the top of all app top 10 lists promotes playfulness as a mainstream, accessible and desirable activity. In marketing terms, familiarity signals relevancy, while play adds the element of surprise and delight. Playfulness pushes us to explore the boundaries of our cognition and is highly effective in evolutionary terms.'

Convincing consumers to buy something that is probably unessential is harder during bearish times, when people

Eclectic by Tom Dixon is a series of items wittily fashioned in copper and wood
tomdixon.net



are more concerned about saving their money. Markit, a British economists' group, predicts that the eurozone is likely to contract in the final quarter of 2012 and at its fastest pace since 2009. An ongoing steep decline in the eurozone was also identified. In Britain, retail sales volumes have continued to dip as shoppers have been cutting back on food and clothing. In this uncertain economic climate, consumers' desire for designs with an emotional value is perhaps enhanced.

'Maybe this upward trend in playfulness is to do with the uncertainties of the recession, because we no longer believe in money and economics and aspects of boom-time consumerism,' says Czerwinski. 'But we have to believe in something, and what we do believe in is our own emotional reaction to the world around us.'

PERSONALITY PLUS

This emphasis on individuality and personality in design is also a reaction to identical, mass-manufactured products and a desire to experiment with design processes. Dutch designer Martijn Rigters made foam chairs at Milan Furniture Fair and during the London Design Festival which were moulded to a person's body so that each seat was made to measure. 'The fact that people can engage with the creation of an object results in a personal relation with it,' says Rigters. 'I noticed that people are really interested in the

process of making an object, which is normally hidden. Giving people an insight in to how things are made and making them part of the process is very valuable. This trend started a couple of years ago and it is clear that crafts are becoming more and more popular.'

Experimenting with artisanal techniques is exemplified by the work of Anton Alvarez, a young Swedish-Chilean designer who works in London. Alvarez has made a thread-wrapping machine that spins yarns of coloured threads around wooden tables and benches, creating zigzagging, energetic patterns in the process. Across the spectrum, designers are seeking out other ways to express themselves. For instance, Tom Dixon has launched a line of miscellaneous objects in copper, cast iron and wood. The Eclectic range sees Ford breaking away from furniture and lighting and moving towards objects as diverse as an English gentleman's brogue, a Champagne bucket, serving bowls, a nutcracker and a money box modelled on an industrial revolution-era factory. Eclectic is partly inspired by Cluedo, a British murder-mystery board game which features various household 'murder weapons' such as a lamp stand and a lead pipe. 'The objects are all artefacts like in an Agatha Christie novel,' says Dixon. 'I like to think that people might like to have the objects around in case they wanted to kill a burglar who came in the night, or to crack a nut or to bang a nail into the wall. You always need a heavy object.' ●

TO SUM UP

Offering something witty and playful is a sure way for designers to differentiate their products, reignite passion and attract the public's attention

Humour is being used as a direct means of reaching out to customers

The current emphasis on individuality and personality in design is also a reaction to identical, mass-manufactured products and a desire to experiment with design processes

Design is becoming a playground for products that have the potential to shake consumers out of the doom and gloom of the recession - and encourage them to spend on pieces that they find irresistible

