

# Click!

-Work, play & LEGO

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A few years ago when the new economy was at its peak it was characterized by a faith in uninterrupted economic growth and rapid technical innovation. The mass media reported on new companies which would conquer the future as the value of their shares rose on the stock market. One type of company was the Internet consultancies. An example of these was the Swedish Framfab (short for Framtidsfabriken, meaning “The Future Factory”). They were to produce Internet solutions for customers such as IKEA and Volvo. But above all they produced hopes and dreams about a bright, IT-supported future. Headed by the charismatic CEO Jonas Birgersson, there was talk of how Framfab would both create and conquer the future.

What actually happened in companies like Framfab? There seemed to be a tension between the high-flown optimistic rhetoric about a whole new networked world and the actual activities pursued in the companies of the new economy. It was with an interest in this tension that I began an ethnological study of Framfab in 1999<sup>1</sup>. I wanted to investigate the culture that was shaped in a company that placed itself on the leading edge of the new economy. I spent time at one of the company’s offices, interviewing the employees and observing what went on. Among other things, I chose to look at how people in the office tried to get work to merge with play and to integrate leisure time with working hours.

One point of access to my analysis of work at Framfab was to ask which objects were crucial there. Computers were the company’s primary means of production and were of course important, but a number of pastel-colored pieces of plastic also acquired a significant role.

## **The lure of plastic bricks**

*Place: Framfab’s office in the Ideon science park, Lund, Sweden.*

*Time: Fall 1999*

Lines of black tape formed tracks across the light-colored wooden floors of the office. They ran between computer tables, groups of armchairs, and IKEA shelves. Some boxes contained a multitude of plastic blocks put together. It looked like Lego. It was Lego, but not the pieces I recognized from my childhood, the cubes and triangles and chubby little plastic men with primitive claw grips and petrified, harmless smiles that never disappeared no matter what you did to them.

The kind of Lego gathered in boxes and standing on shelves in the office belonged to a different category of product known as Mindstorms. The product was the result of collaboration between Lego and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). It consisted of relatively advanced Lego kits which could be steered with the aid of computer-based software. The reason for Lego lying in a box at Framfab was that some of the people who worked in the office had started a play project. The plastic pieces contained meaning in several ways.

Lego can be linked to the way in which images of Framfab as a company were created. The Mindstorms components and the colorful Lego blocks in the box caught the attention of visitors when they came to the office. They attracted people. When the prime minister, Göran Persson, and the minister of trade, Leif Pagrotsky, visited Framfab in 1999, they stopped with interest beside the small pieces of plastic and half-finished Mindstorms robots. Andreas Carlgren from the Center Party—like many others—was also fascinated by the Lego blocks. They lay there in a box, like a materialization of a playful attitude and IT activities like those reflected in Douglas Coupland’s acclaimed book *Microserfs* (1995), in which Lego is associated with young people in the IT business. In many respects, the Mindstorm props in the office harmonized with the image of innovative, deeply involved hackers.

The Lego pieces opened up a field of associations for visitors like Göran Persson. They caused visitors’ fantasies and associations to move to some extent in a predetermined direction. Lego, and especially an advanced category of product like Mindstorms, signaled a childlike curiosity and an innovative attitude that harmonized with the image of Framfab painted in newspapers and on television. The blocks were like a discreet promise of playfully simple innovative products and growth. The pieces of Lego in their box became a motor that powered fantasies and images of the company. Through their power to symbolize and steer associations, they fitted the placing of Framfab in various media, particularly as a backdrop to politicians’ encounter with the young company. Lego was allowed to symbolize the playful company.

## **Work and play**

Playing at work, or making work feel playful, was crucial to a company like Framfab around the turn of the millennium. The theme of playful work echoed in the talk of the new economy and in the demand for constant innovation.

On 17 July 2000 there was an article in the magazine *Infoworld* about the dismantling of what was called the “entrenched rules of the Old Economy,” the first of which declared that there was no room to have fun at work. The management magazine *Fast Company* also questioned whether work had to be boring: “Where is it written that important assignments must be carried out with an air of grim determination? That breakthrough ideas can only emerge in a business-as-usual environment? That work must always feel like, well, work? (*Fast Company* Jan/Feb 2000). Rolf Jensen, head of the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies, declared that tomorrow’s work will have the character of “hard fun” (1999), meaning that play will be integrated with work.

The equipment that dominated the Framfab office in various ways aroused associations with playfulness. Most work stations were decorated with various types of objects, with everything from Linux penguins to Star Trek dolls and old video games. Moreover, Framfab’s most essential tool, the computer, could in itself evoke associations with play. Several of the fundamental parts of the graphical interface in programs like Microsoft Windows consisted of colorful components. Various small icons for folders, recycle bins, search tools, and the like made the graphical work environment on the screen anything but serious and solemn. More producers than Microsoft have chosen to design their software to stimulate a cheerful mood. Apple’s operative system Mac OS, for example, is if anything even more colorful than Microsoft’s. When launching the OS X operative system at the start of 2001, Apple wrote on its website: “The desktop is your work (or play) surface and retains the behavior you are used to, which eases the transition to MAC OS X” ([www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com)).

The boundary between work and leisure could be blurred when the same computer was used for both work and play. A Framfab employee could sit at the computer feeding in data, analyzing, viewing and manipulating pictures, listening to music, searching for information, creating and using websites, dealing in stock, playing games, and so on. All this at the computer, on the same screen, with the same mouse and keyboard and the same software: a web browser, a search engine, a series of commands such as cut, copy, and paste (Manovich 2001:66).

The office itself was a place where the boundary between work and leisure was supposed to be erased. The company’s equipment and premises could be freely used for recreation. Employees were also encouraged to bring along friends and loved ones to the workplace. Parallel projects—activities not directly linked to the company’s production—were affirmed at the office. It was even envisaged that there should be a time margin in the operations so that there would be room for play during working hours, but this proved to be a rather optimistic idea. If one wanted to have projects on the side, it could mean long hours in the office.

The theme of play was thus present at Framfab. The dividing line between work and leisure became invisible, erased by the very tools of the job with their playfulness. The Lego Mindstorms project was an example of how the office was simultaneously a playroom. Those who started it all and brought the Lego blocks to Framfab were moreover working on a project for which Lego was not wholly unimportant. The work and play on the project led to the product known as Brikks (see [www.brikks.com](http://www.brikks.com)). Brikks is a kind of web portal developed out of a product that Framfab designed for the telecom company Ericsson. There are links between Brikks and Lego.

## **Modularity**

The media scholar Lev Manovich has pointed out the basic features and some essential principles of what he calls “new media”; I prefer the term digital media. The most important of these media today is the computer. New or digital media, according to Manovich, are characterized by modularity, which means that objects within the framework of new media consist of (more or less) independent parts. These parts are discrete, that is, separate, units. The parts of digital objects consist in turn of smaller discrete parts, and so on, all the way down to bits (binary digits), the basic building blocks of digital media, or Manovich’s new media (Manovich, 2001:31).

The product Brikks, which Framfab started to develop at the end of the 1990s, is a platform for delivering digital content and services. It is supposed to be adaptable to different types technologies: computers, personal digital assistants (PDAs), WAP gadgets, and so on. Brikks is based on a modular structure. The product is built up of a number of discrete parts which are intended to make things easier for user and developer alike. Brikks is thus in line with one of the central features of digital media: modularity.

A computer, like most other digital media, is a highly complex artifact. Using various modular solutions is a way to simplify both the use and the development of the technology. As a stage in this simplification it may be necessary to have models to think with. In the development of Brikks, something physical and material was therefore used as

an aid to thought, to pinpoint what was going on under the shell of the digital equipment. This physical and material aid was Lego.

Lego is a concept that harmonizes in large measure with the modularity of computers. Lego blocks are discrete modules that can be clicked together to make larger objects. Lego was thus an excellent conceptual tool for thinking with, especially during the development of Brikks, which emphasized the modularity of digital media.

The link between Lego and computers, as I have mentioned, was made explicit in the novel *Microserfs* by the American author Douglas Coupland. The book is a fictional account of a gang of young people on the west coast of the USA who first work together at Microsoft's office in Seattle, and who then start a company of their own farther south, in California. Lego plays a central part in the book. The plastic toy is crucial for the development of a program called *Oop!*, a kind of software Lego. Coupland's *Oop!* was not found at the Ideon office or in the development of Brikks, but another oop was. The name that Coupland had used for the software Lego product in the book was not chosen at random or because it sounds funny. In programming contexts the abbreviation OOP stands for Object-Oriented Programming. The object orientation in this type of programming is based on a modular concept and is thus linked to the modularity of computers. Oop is a central feature of much of program development, including Brikks.

Within the oop framework, the modularity of computers makes it easy to reuse previously created objects. Discrete parts can be selected and incorporated in new objects. In conceptual terms this is like Lego. Building with Lego means using prefabricated bricks which can be combined, within some limits, into various creations. Prefabrication recurs in several contexts connected with IT around the turn of the millennium.

### **Prefab future**

*Place: The Riviera cinema in Stockholm*

*Time: February 2000*

Framfab's CEO Jonas Birgersson stood on the stage dressed in the yellow and blue shirt of the Swedish national ice hockey team. He was presenting the company's accounts. In addition, he put on a show in which the high point came when "Birger" threw a brick through a pane of glass. This was a symbolic gesture. The meaning was "Brikks breaks Windows". Framfab's product Brikks would oust the Windows operative system. According to this gesture, Brikks would be, if not an operative system, then at least a substitute for one, something new and revolutionary in the computer world with the potential to eliminate market leaders like Microsoft. This description, however, was not really adequate. Several people at Framfab, particularly those working with Brikks, thought that Birgersson's symbolic breaking of the glass was a poor illustration of what Brikks was. Instead of eliminating Microsoft Windows, the work with Brikks involved conspicuous use of Microsoft's products.

Despite the simplified and partly incorrect symbolism, the CEO's gesture was important. It was significant since it indicated a direction. For analysts, competitors, and customers, the company was presenting a product that was not yet available on the market. In the IT business this type of product preannouncement is called vaporware (see Hoxmeier, 2000), vapor as in steam or mist. Vaporware is technology that has not yet been launched. It is a future product which is vaguely discernible as in a fog. By preannouncing products, a company gives signals about what the future may be envisioned to look like—a future including the company's products. A company like Framfab could thus claim that the future was already being produced within its walls. The future was prefabricated rhetorically by Framfab (The Factory of the Future). When a company points the direction in this way, it should be viewed in relation to the fact that a great many other actors portrayed the future as complex and highly unpredictable.

Birgersson's announcement of Brikks at the Riviera in Stockholm should also be seen in relation to the way the product was otherwise presented. The simple, almost Lego-like, character of the concept was emphasized. In the marketing it was combined with a parallel product concept developed by a subsidiary of Framfab, Hårdvarubolaget ("The Hardware Company"). This other concept, called Blokks, consists of physical components which, together with a broadband connection and software modules in the form of Brikks, makes up a complete electronic solution for consumers. The products, in the form of vaporware, were launched with the slogan "just klikk on!" It was a simple matter of clicking modules or components together, just like Lego—prefabricated parts combined within the framework of a standardized concept.

In connection with computers and digital technology, Lego can serve as a concept with which to think. Around 2000 it became part of a field of associations surrounding the work at Framfab and what the company stood for. It included links both to fundamental principles of computers and to a colorful, playful attitude. The Legos lying in a box at the Ideon office should be viewed in relation to Blokks, Brikks, and the staking of claims to the future with the aid of vaporware. The future may seem unpredictable, but at the Lego box in the Ideon office, certain contours could be conjured up.

### **Click together and take apart**

Lego, Brikks, the young, growing, innovative company, colorful little pieces ingenious in their simplicity. Ready to click together. When put together, the pieces ended up in a field of associations in which Framfab became an exciting new company, worth investing in, and with a rising stock value.

In a way, the modular resemblance to Lego can also be linked to the organization of Framfab. The Framfab group consisted of different “cells,” which were quite simply the different offices in the group. Each cell consisted of about fifty people divided into a number of projects. The idea of the cells was that they would be relatively independent units. The organization thus consisted of a number of components put together in the form of cells, a kind of modular organization. These cells were also in a way prefabricated. Various smaller companies were bought up by Framfab, becoming the nucleus of new cells within the Framfab group. It was a form of growth whereby new offices and small companies were quickly integrated in the group, like Lego bricks assembled on a green plastic base. Different colors made it a colorful whole. Framfab’s growth was in large measure modular, like a Lego structure that just got bigger and bigger. Several companies in the same business as Framfab, for example, Adcore, Cell Network, and Icon Medialab also represented rapid growth through the purchase of smaller companies. Through its emphasis on the cell concept, however, Framfab stood out with its modular organization.

The rise and growth lasted some way into the year 2000. In the spring the bubble of the new economy burst. Just before the downturn in March 2000, Framfab had introduced guidelines for the group. Form and corporate policy were to become more austere, and this was to be communicated within the group. A new graphic profile was designed, with a central color that was to be called Framfab green. However, the company would soon find itself in a crisis. The group was decimated as piece after piece was quickly removed from the organization. Using the Lego metaphor, one could say that, after a few years, all that was left was the green Framfab base. Lego is ingenious: it can be taken apart just as quickly as it can be clicked together. What happened to the pieces of Framfab that were taken apart is a more intricate question. It is clear, however, that the people who lost their jobs at short notice—unlike Lego men—did not keep their smiles.

### **Flexploitation and the modular day**

In its slimmed-down form Framfab concentrated in 2001 on its core operations, namely, selling consultancy hours. Jonas Birgersson left Framfab the same year. The products Brikks and Blokks were transferred to a new company, Labs2, headed by Birgersson.

In spring 2002 the Framfab office is no longer in the Ideon science park; the Danish company Maersk Data has taken over the premises. Framfab has undergone a radical reduction. In the course of the process, it has also acquired a more restrained profile. Talk of playfulness in the organization and of the new economy is heard increasingly rarely. In 2002 survival and profitability are more common terms in the rhetoric about the future of Framfab and many other IT companies. One may wonder whether anything remained of the desired merger of work and leisure when the new economy was deflated. To answer the question, let us once again go back to the hopeful time in Framfab, when the company cherished playfulness and boundlessness.

Playfulness and pleasurable work are mainly a positive thing. Yet this does not mean that the attempts to integrate work and leisure at Framfab were without problems. Several of those who worked at the Framfab office were so involved for a time that it was difficult to discern whether they really did it because it was fun or were exploited as a result of their delight in their work. It is undoubtedly the case that certain benefits, such as the opportunity to play at the workplace or to have a free mobile phone, tied the staff more closely to the company. They were expected to both work and play at the office. They were expected to keep their mobile phones switched on, so that they would always be available. Some of the benefits they were offered entailed a normative adjustment. Working hours and the employees’ attitude to their work had to show flexibility. We are justified in speaking of flexploitation, that is, a give and take of freedoms and benefits on the part of the management.

Employees were expected to be adaptable, and flexibility was simultaneously viewed as a kind of freedom. The sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel has written about the handling of time in social life (1981). If we look back a few decades, according to him, flexible working hours have been associated with high-status jobs, whereas rigid time control has often been associated with low-status jobs. The advocacy of flexibility should be regarded in the light of the positive connotations it had for decades, as something enjoyed by senior management. This difference in the regulation of working hours may have to do with the fact that a manager is expected to be more allied to his commitments than a worker with lower status. Flexibility goes together with a sense of responsibility to one’s work.

The attitude of the boss or the management was extremely normative in the case of Framfab. Jonas Birgersson became the yardstick and model for the employees. For him Framfab was fun. As he said himself, statutory regulation

of working hours was a problem. He was proceeding from his own attitude and reflected his zeal for work in the rest of the organization. It called for trust within the organization, with everyone being prepared to work without limits. Birgersson's rhetoric showed that Framfab was acting in a world where the order of things was not what it should be, where regulations and outsiders' attitudes were a thing of the past. It was essential to hurry, to work hard to reach the promised future. On one occasion the CEO expressed his discontent with the state of things: "Working hours? What are working hours? My problems are constantly revolving in my head, round the clock, and it's the same for all the people here. The whole rule system is completely wrong. All our employees are employed on trust, because otherwise they would not be allowed to spend so much time at their workplace. So it's the only way to get round the rules" (Jonas Birgersson, cited in Uvell 1999:93).

Birgersson's rhetoric felt right in several cases, but sometimes the contact with the vision became unclear for the employees. The work was not fun all the time, it was not always stimulating to work and be in the office. Especially at times just before deadlines there was not much room for playfulness. One of the employees with whom I spoke, for example, said that he felt like a zombie before a deadline. In these strategic periods, time became a paradoxical experience of stagnation and gloominess.

Several of the people I interviewed also found the fragmentation of the work irritating. The days were timetabled in smaller and smaller parts according to a pattern which dictated that more work should be done in the same time. Time was cut up into pieces. The direction of day-to-day work thus became elusive. The present felt chaotic.

The calendar's strict compartmentalization of time is a good illustration of the fragmentation of the day. The squares in a diary may be seen as modules, or perhaps as small Lego bricks which are put together into days and weeks which fill our lives. Computer programs like Outlook or Palm Desktop, symptomatically, offer calendars which can be filled with small pastel-colored squares, like Legos.

A day represented by the squares on cross-ruled paper or on a computer screen paradoxically looks empty and without content if the squares are not filled with commitments and meetings. Yet it was during the periods that were not marked in the diary that people worked with the essential production at the computers at Framfab or engaged in their play projects. The temptation to fill all the squares in the diary with various appointments undeniably reduced the time available for production and led to frequent alternation between different tasks. One of the employees told how he had started to fill in the empty squares in his diary with tasks that were not usually written into it. He marked large portions of the working days with "ordinary" work, to avoid having his time filled with meetings and the like.

Long bouts of undisturbed work or time for play were in short supply at the Ideon office. It was difficult to have long spells of continuous activity at the screen or at the Lego box without incoming e-mail calling for attention, the mobile phone ringing, a colleague asking some question, or a meeting or presentation that had to be held.

Play in business should be viewed in the light of this shortage of time. The inheritance of the playful companies in the new economy at the turn of the millennium could very well be the insight that it is difficult in practice to combine work with play. In a for-profit stock-exchange-quoted company in which time is money, play easily crystallizes into something that gradually becomes less and less playful. This was never made visible in the rhetoric about the playful enterprise of the new economy.

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## Footnotes

This text first appeared in: *Reflexioner* 1/2002.

<sup>1</sup> The primary result of my study became my doctoral dissertation (Willim, 2002). There is a short presentation of the work at [www.framtid.nu].