

Start Playing

Michael Punt



Executive Editor

Prof. dr Michael Punt

Editors-in-Chief

Dr Martha Blassnigg

Dr Hannah Drayson

Managing Editors

Amanda Egbe

Martyn Woodward

Associate Editors

Rita Cachão

Edith Doove

Joanna Griffin

Claudy Op den Kamp

Jacqui Knight

Marcio Rocha

Production and Design

Amanda Egbe, Martyn Woodward

*Please contact the original authors and /or copyright holders
for permission to reproduce these materials.*

Transtechnology Research • Reader 2012/13

Plymouth University

Portland Square, Drake Circus

Plymouth PL4 8AA

United Kingdom

© 2013 Transtechnology Research

ISBN 978-0-9538332-3-8

Start Playing

Michael Punt

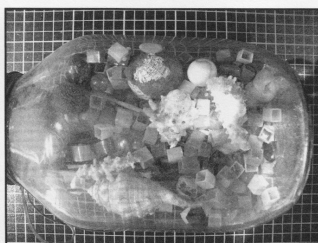
As I write this catalogue note for *Play & Prosume, Technology Exchange and Flow*, I have before me a small rectangular black plastic button taken from a VHS recorder that I bought more than ten thousand midnights ago for my research, filmmaking and teaching. It is oblong with a slightly rounded surface that is smooth and pleasant to touch. It has a sheen rather than a gloss which, if memory serves me right, exactly matched the facia of the apparatus and the other buttons. Measuring 7 mm by 25 mm it has, engraved on its surface, a line drawing of an equilateral triangle with its hypotenuse vertical and parallel to the short edge of the button, its apex pointing to the right, which may or may not have been the direction that the recorder ran in the PLAY mode. The grooves of this line drawing have been filled with solid white material flush to the surface of the button. Engraved in a similar manner on the left hand space of the button there are letters, in upper-case *sans serif* type, that spell out the single word 'PLAY'. For more than twenty-five years this button has puzzled me because I have never been sure if this word, formed by depressions in the surface, was an invitation or an instruction – the emphatic redundancy of the triangle to the right of the word (the direction of travel of reading) has always left me with the suspicion that it is intended as an imperative: the machine insists that those who read the word follow the arrow and play.

The PLAY button seems to be remarkably fecund. Since I first noticed it I have become aware of a massive family of PLAY buttons that have transmuted over the last two decades to meet other imperatives, such as miniaturisation and an apparently irresistible drift towards minimalism, non-linguistic communication and global intelligibility. The variety of its mutations can be viewed through a simple image search for the term 'play button'. For the most part, it seems that they are no longer rectangular, opting for the laziness of the circle (produced in steel injection moulds more easily machined with a drill), inviting the 'dot' of the pushing finger, and they have become, by way of apparent compensation, more colourful and garish. The triangular image, which on the button I am looking at is a line drawing, is now more often than not a solid triangle (again so much easier to mass produce) and, as if to apologise for the short cut, it is sometimes surrounded by a circle – a design conceit suggesting an extra emphasis on the importance of this button above all others. But whatever the economies and warm gestures towards the user, the PLAY button is an order dressed up as small talk.

Nowadays some PLAY buttons are intangible, by which I mean that they are simply pixels on a screen that appropriate the tactility of an interface to which they make no contribution, as, for example, on Youtube screens or in the invitation to "meet some of



Play jar



Play jar



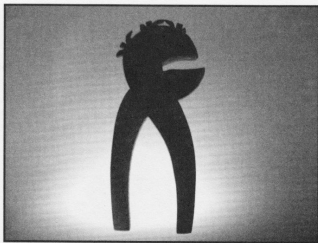
Play jar

the awesome people who make Wikipedia"; imperatives disguised as phatic expressions. These intangible buttons cannot be felt or pressed, so (perversely) they revert to the antique definition of a button as "a small knob or stud for use or ornament" (Oxford English Dictionary). Whatever the form – material or virtual – these triangles, which are almost always equilateral, invariably point to the right and have, almost without exception, devoured the word 'PLAY' and replaced it with a hieroglyph. Faced with the compelling graphics and redundant illumination, I am now no longer unsure: the military reduction of the utterance offers not an invitation to play – in the sense that my agency is acknowledged – but an instruction that begrudges my agency, an imperative to play on the machine's terms, which of course is not to play at all.

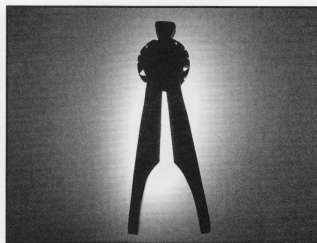
As I look around my various places of work, rest (and, yes, play), I have been surprised by the ubiquity of these little buttons. At one time, I thought to count the PLAY buttons that infested my environment, but their sheer number and ingenious disguises defeated me, in much the same way as I was defeated in 1970 when I attempted to audit the number of electric motors in my studio, office and home. Like the migration of electric motors, magnets and petrol engines from their obvious manifestations into micro-servers in hard drives, fridge decorations, lawn mowers, etc., PLAY buttons seem to have proliferated silently, like a colony of insects, until there are too many to count with certainty. However, unlike the intrinsic function of an electric motor (for

example, in a VHS recorder), the PLAY button is a promiscuous, parasitic chameleon, quite indifferent to its host; we could get on quite well without them. After all, my old reel-to-reel tape recorder managed quite well (once it was plugged in) with 'start', 'record' and 'stop'. The dozen or so film projectors that I seem to possess often have no instruction at all on their switches and levers, just unmarked inconsistencies on the surface that bind the user into a guild by flattering their expertise. More a pernicious virus than an organism, the PLAY button has insinuated itself into the cult of 'STANDBY' and usurped the ON/OFF switch that is necessarily attached to every device that requires a source of power and has both an active and a passive mode. It has, over the years, undermined the essential binary of power and become a default ideology masquerading as a switch. And although most obvious and ubiquitous in the state-of-the-art entertainment technologies of the 21st century, the ancestry of its rhetoric and its mutability lies much further back in the tensions between science, technology and design and the agency of the user.

In retrospect, one of the great engines of modern civilisation is undoubtedly the will to understand the world we apprehend (both material and intangible) through a practice that we now know as experimental science. Its methods and truths have been hard-won through the work of devoted individuals and groups who were committed to accuracy and processes of repetition. As has been pointed out by many commentators on scientific practice, all



Nut Cracker



Nut Cracker

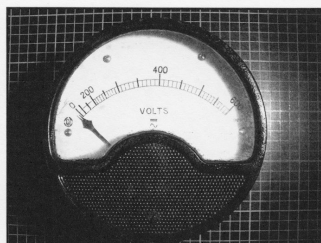


Advertising Paper Weight

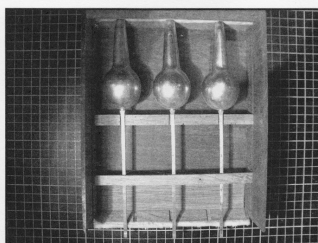
science involves measuring, measuring involves machines and machines involve calibration. And although we most often hear of the brilliant minds who were able to articulate scientific problems, devise experimental methods and interpret data in order to achieve new insights, without the dedication of experimental scientists, the ingenuity of an army of instrument makers, and the precision of engineers and technologists of many shades, the underlying work and epistemological practices of scientists would simply not be possible. Moreover, it is an obvious point worth repeating that, without the sorts of instruments that scientists need to accurately measure what they 'observe', the problems they are able to conceptualise would be, if not beyond their imagination, at best no more attached to truth than science fiction. Hand-in-glove with the laboratory technicians and instrument makers, the brilliant are only able to imagine problems that state-of-the-art instrumentation could possibly measure (or suggest problems that might reasonably be measured in the future). This applies as much to CERN's Large Hadron Collider as it does to the humble hydrometer that testifies to the state of a car battery or certifies the density of a liquid in the school laboratory.

In the middle of the 19th century, the heyday of experimental science as a collaboration with an active audience, scientific instrument makers were versatile, ingenious and both socially and professionally mobile. Mainly working with scientists rather than for them, they were as at home demonstrating the latest scientific

knowledge to professional and public audiences as they were devising entertaining little toys to inform, amuse and distract. A good instrument maker had to understand the scientific principles and goals of the laboratory, and represent the ideas and speculations of scientists through experimental apparatus that was robust, versatile and slightly more accurate than the experiment demanded. More accurate, in order to allow for an acceptable tolerance in the measurements; versatile, in order to respond to unexpected results that might be the consequence of error, speculation or creative contingency; and robust, because (by definition) the apparatus needed to be mobile in order to yield similar results if the experimental claim was to be verified. If the instrument maker supplemented his income as an itinerant lecturer, then size and energy consumption also mattered (since batteries were heavy), and if there was an entertainment aspect to the demonstration (as there often was, and still is, in public science), then the rhetoric of the instrument – its appearance and style – was as important as the shape of a placebo. Working with the established techniques of engineering and carpentry, and the mechanical skills of a watch-maker, glassblower and lens grinder, scientific instrument makers produced a particular family of objects that today may strike us as arcane, enigmatic displays of forgotten craft and old-fashioned knowledge. But their apparent functional logic disguises their guile. They were thoughtfully put together to both function reliably and seduce the user. While the design of the laboratory



Voltmeter



3 Hydrometers



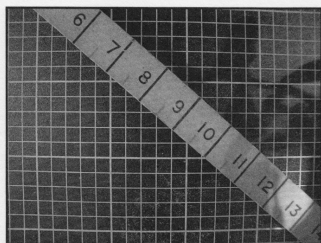
3 Hydrometers (detail)

instrument may have been shaped by experimental needs, the constellation of decisions concerning technical problems, shape, size, materials and colour were also influenced by the imperatives of demonstration, display, the rhetoric of truth and the sceptical participation of the observer. And where laboratory instruments were subsequently developed and exploited as a publicly shared apparatus, as for example with the phonograph, the photographic camera or the paraphernalia of home-movie making, the legacy of the underlying science remained inscribed in apparatus designed for the amateur (or non-scientist) through the multi-disciplinarity of the craftsmanship, style and (at times, unnecessary) precision of manufacture. The archaeological traces of this ancestry are not hard to see in the digital camera, mobile phone or iPod.

Whether designing for tolerances (free-play), creative contingency (inventive play), theatricality (performative play), amusement, diversion, distraction or unexpected locations and contexts (exploratory play), the scientific instrument maker was inextricably bound up with the public in ways that scientists were not – or at least were obliged to disavow. The rhetoric of their solutions to complex technical problems embraced a wide spectrum of user participation, drawing on the established procedures of craftsmen, ranging from jewellers, lens grinders and watchmakers to shipwrights, blacksmiths and glassblowers. Their legacy, to be found today in science museums as evidence of science, is more properly regarded as the material trace of interaction between a

range of producers and production skills and a network of uses (and users) that the instruments served in their various iterations. The absurd shapes of the blown glass, the apparently irrational combinations of exotic woods and metal, and the enigmatic confidence of forms happy to stand out of context, were often topped off with an inscrutable array of arcane symbols and divisions that seem to propose the logic of another race or universe. They are the epitome of “the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella!” And, out of their immediate historical context, they are compelling objects, which fascinated the wider public in the pages of *La Nature*, and which Max Ernst remediated in *La femme 100 têtes* and *Une semaine de bonté* as the epitome of Surrealism. In this sense, the instruments of science that are used to underpin its truths, up to and including the Large Hadron Collider, a machine that cost £2.1 billion to “look at the beginning of time”, are monuments to an extravagant intellectual exchange and flow between different constituencies that is, for all of them, both serious and never far from play.

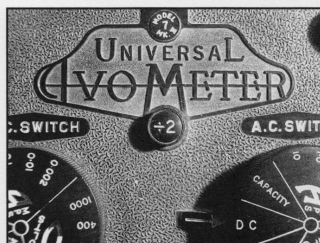
The rectangular button commanding me to PLAY, that I must have pressed ten thousand times before my VHS recorder eventually became too expensive to repair, has now been subsumed by a soft-touch flexible neoprene micro-button on a small remote control that commands a Personal Video Recorder. The button is so small that there can be no textual imperative, merely a tasteful grey equilateral triangle on a darker grey ground, pointing to the right



Foot Measuring device



Universal Avometer (detail)



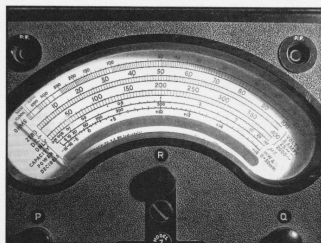
Universal Avometer (detail)

(for reasons connected more to an unsupportable concept of time and space as directional than to the technology it commands). The technological ancestry of the 19th century, which still informs the narrative structures and spectacle of what I see on the television screen, has been cosmetically erased in the little touch that wakes up the sleeping data warehouse to amuse and inform me. With hindsight – and the little remote in my hand – I feel even more confident that the persistent rhetoric of symbolic minimalism, in contrast to the over-determined and redundant inscription ‘PLAY’, is intended as an imperative tinged with failing confidence: an hysterical assertion, which masks the necessity of human exchange and flow before the machine can do its inscrutable work as a player in the dispositive of the creative apparatus.

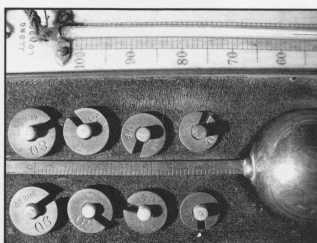
References

- Altick, Richard D.** (1978) *The Shows of London*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Burke, Edmund** (1756; 1999) *The Sublime and the Beautiful*. London: Penguin.
- Hoffmann, Roald and Boyd Whyte, Ian** (eds.) (2011) *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holmes, Richard** (2009) *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*. London: Pantheon Books.
- Latour, Bruno and Woolgar, Steve** (1979) *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Luckhurst, Roger** (2009) *The Invention of Telepathy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McEwan, Ian** (2007) *On Chesil Beach*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Morus, Iwan** (1992) 'Marketing the Machine: The Construction of Electrotherapeutics as Viable Medicine in Early Victorian England', *Medical History*, 36, pp. 34–52.
- Morus, Iwan** (1993) 'Currents from the Underworld: Electricity and Technology of Display in Early Victorian England', *ISIS*, 84, pp. 50–69.
- Ponge, Francis** (1967). *Le Savon*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Punt, Michael** (2008) 'Play Orbit: jugando con la historia del juego / Play Orbit: A Play on the History of Play', in **Dragona, D., et.al.** (eds.) (2008) *Homo Ludens Ludens*. Gijón: Laboral, pp. 134–149 and pp. 254–260.
- Rittaud-Hutinet, Jacques, et.al.** (1995) *Letters: Auguste and Louis Lumière*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Science and Technology Facilities Council** (2013) 'Welcome to the Large Hadron Collider'. Available at: <http://www.lhc.ac.uk/>.
- Shapin, Stephen and Schaffer, Simon** (1995) *Leviathan and the Air Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Shapin, Stephen** (1996) *The Scientific Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilder, Billy** (dir.) (1950), *Sunset Boulevard*, Paramount.

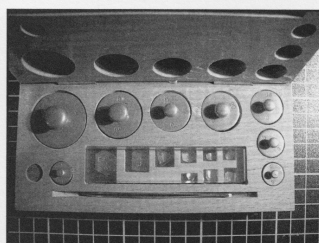
Images: Michael Punt



Universal Avometer (detail)



Hydrometer (detail)



Mechanical Balance Weights (detail)

About the Author:

Prof. dr. Michael Punt is Professor of Art and Technology, Transtechnology Research, Plymouth University.

* A version of this paper was published within Jahrmann, M., Felderer, B. (eds), (2013) *Play & Prosume*. Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst.



www.trans-techresearch.net
www.trans-techresearch.net/papers