

# The New York Times

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### Designing Distraction: Executive Toys

By JULIE LASKY February 5, 2015

In an era of digital devices, why are simple desktop toys still so appealing?

In any language, “executive toy” refers to an object that sits on a desk in a workplace or home office and is fiddled with.

Far from lacking functionality, such objects are said to offer diversion, provoke dialogue and relieve stress.

Adrienne Appell, a representative of the Toy Industry Association sees nothing incongruous about desktop gewgaws in the digital age.

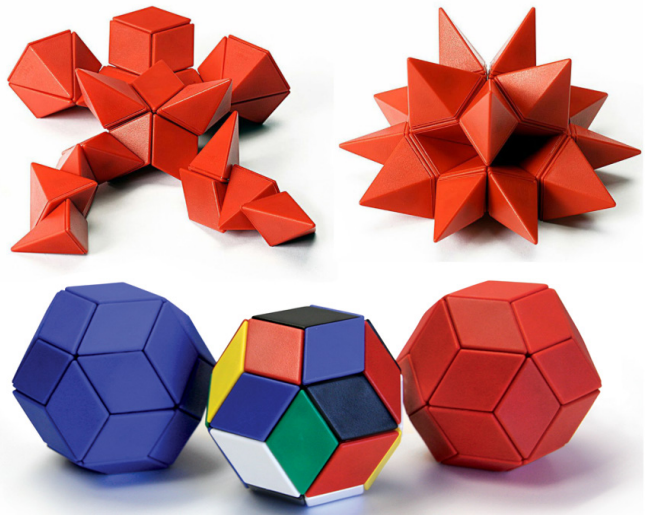
“With today’s extended work hours, multiple screens and multiple devices, it’s even more important for people to step back and take that moment to de-stress,” she said.

Scott G. Eberle, vice president for play studies at the Strong museum in Rochester, said another benefit of desktop toys is the way they lull you into a meditative state.

Mr. Eberle, who edits the Strong’s American Journal of Play and has written extensively on subjects like day-dreaming, sees creative value in [those] objects...“Ideally, you need to move yourself into a state where your mind is offline.”

For John Edmark, [a] designer and artist...our diminishing awe of digital tools is exactly what attracts us to desktop toys.

“We know anything can happen on that computer screen, and it may be beautiful or magical,” he said. But objects in the analog world are bound by physical constraints. When they appear to defy the laws of nature, they seem all the more remarkable.



For [design curator] Donald Albrecht, executive toys are “aspirational,” as he put it — less tools for provoking creativity than foghorns of identity and status in a sea of corporate homogeneity.

In 2004, Roger von Oech, who had been writing and consulting on workplace creativity since the ’70s, developed a puzzle that was a 30-sided polyhedron assembled from 30 tiny magnetic pyramids. The point was not just to reassemble the object once it was dismantled, but to reconfigure the pieces in interesting ways. In 2006, he [Creative Whack Company] began to market the toy as the Ball of Whacks.

“I basically created this product for cubicle geeks, people working with their minds, coming up with ideas,” he said. “They need to take a five- or 10-minute break, now and then, to pick up a physical object.”

Mr. von Oech found his market: Three years ago, Google bought 7,000 Balls of Whacks for its programmers and developers. He also appealed far beyond, selling around a million of the puzzles and their offshoots.