

CHAPTER TEN

CONNECTED

The art of
putting
unconnected
things together
to create
something
completely
new.



In the late 1950s and early 1960s, novelist and key figure in the Beat Generation William S. Burroughs¹ developed the *cut-up technique*, a method of creative writing in which text is cut up into smaller pieces and then rearranged randomly. In the 1975 BBC documentary about David Bowie, *Cracked Actor*, we see him creating song lyrics by randomly picking phrases he's written on strips of paper. We watch as he cuts a sheet into strips, on which he's some written phrases, and then piece them together, starting with 'I'm an alligator', and next 'I'm a mama papa', forming the lyrics for what becomes his song, *Moonage Daydream*. He explains that he's only used the technique on a couple of songs but has found it helpful igniting what's in his imagination.² Kurt Cobain also experimented with the cut-up technique and Thom Yorke, of Radiohead, used it when writing the band's Kid A album by writing single lines of lyrics, putting them in a hat and drawing them out randomly to make a song.

While we're not (necessarily) advocating totally giving up control, **when it comes to freeing up some creativity in business there's something to be said for adding a degree of chance.** We believe that some well-orchestrated chaos can be a wonderful thing.³

¹His work includes *Naked Lunch*, and Burroughs' life was fictionalised in Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*. Burroughs said that T.S. Eliot's 434-line poem 'The Waste Land' (1922) is an example of the cut-up technique.

²*Cracked Actor* is the title of a song released on Bowie's phenomenal 1973 album *Aladdin Sane*. It should be noted that *Moonage Daydream* was written by Bowie in 1971 so we can only assume that in the documentary, which was filmed in 1974, he was recreating how he had written it.

³*Recipes for Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook*, a 624-page manual, described by the editors, CrimethInc. Ex-Workers's Collective, as 'a tactical handbook for revolutionary action', was written collectively over three years and released in 2004. One of the 62 chapters (or 'recipes') is called *Behavioral Cut-Ups*, and involves connecting two unrelated socially-acceptable behaviours, such as public speaking and public transport, to create something new, such as making a speech on a bus.

SLIPPING ON BANANA SKINS

'Humor is reason gone mad.'
Groucho Marx



Is it just us, or is watching someone slipping on a banana skin always funny? You can't help but laugh even though you've seen it a million times (never in real life, unfortunately) and know exactly what's going to happen each time. **Humour and creativity**

are very closely related. In fact, creative people are often very funny too. Like creativity, making people laugh often involves making connections between two seemingly unrelated ideas that results in something surprising and different. Take a man walking along the street minding his own business, especially one who is doing something self-absorbed, like reading a newspaper (or checking his email), add an innocuous-looking banana skin and you get a result that is dramatically different from what the pedestrian intended. Arse in air looking stunned (but not seriously hurt, of course – if he ended up breaking his neck, the humour mostly disappears). From in control to helpless and surprised in less than the time it takes to say, 'What the ... !'

Slipping on banana skins is more than just funny; it can help the creative process too, especially when the ideas aren't flowing as easily as they should. Throw in a joke or a provocative image and see how that can disrupt thinking that might be becoming stale or getting stuck in a rut. It doesn't really matter what it is so long as it serves the same function as the real banana skin does, by changing the course of what's happening in a dramatic and sudden way. It introduces an element that is bizarre or outrageous or irreverent, and makes an odd connection between two ideas as a way to tell the brain to do the same with the problem it's working on. It's saying

to the left side of the brain to step back for a while and let the more freewheeling right side take a shot at it. It's a mental nudge saying it's OK to let loose a little and bring in some more crazy thoughts.

Several studies have found that being funny and being creative are ready bedfellows. One, for instance, way back in 1965, was about the relationship between wit, sarcasm and creativity. Results showed the 'wits' among the 156 airmen being tested to be better than the less witty ones at group problem-solving.⁴ Other studies have found a positive correlation between creativity and the ability to comprehend humour (getting the joke) among undergraduates and children, as well as between humour production (making the jokes) and creativity. The researchers argued that the link between humour and creativity is because the two have a common basis in the ability to find hidden connections between apparently disparate concepts.⁵ Studies by Avner Ziv (we think his name is an anagram, but can't quite figure out for what) also support this link. In one of them,⁶ adolescents who had listened to a funny recording did significantly better on creativity tests than those who had not. In another,⁷ Ziv asked adolescents to write witty captions to cartoons or write witty responses to the standard Torrance Creativity Test, and in both cases he found the 'humorous atmosphere' significantly increased their creativity scores.

HA + HA = AHA!

⁴'Wit, Creativity, and Sarcasm', E. E. Smith and H. L. White, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 49, pp.131–134, 1965.

⁵'Creativity and Sense of Humor', L. L. Rouff, *Psychological Reports*, 37, p.1022. 1975.

⁶'Facilitating Effects of Humor on Creativity', Avner Ziv, *Journal of Educational Psychology*; Vol. 68, No. 3, pp. 318–22, 1976.

⁷'The Influence of Humorous Atmosphere on Divergent Thinking', Avner Ziv, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*; Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 68–75, January 1983.

This is another example of what I call 'breaking the plane' (see my story about Bob Dylan in Chapter 6).

One time the film director Paul Verhoeven⁸ was getting frustrated and angry in the recording studio and no-one could understand why he was so upset. I was looking on incredulously while people like my brilliant and trusted engineer and film music producer Steve McClaughlin were saying they were quitting. At the same time, to add to the tension, there was a 60-piece orchestra sitting waiting to play the next

piece of music. I went out of the studio, put on a woman's dress and earrings, burst back into the studio and insisted on dancing with Paul. At first he was in shock, then he started laughing and so did everyone else and the session got going again. It's what I call breaking the plane.



THE JOKER

Throwing something into the mix to add freshness to thinking is always a good idea.

Theatre and film director Matthew Warchus told Business Playground how a single word in a new way can give a scene a whole new meaning: 'I was working on Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* right in the beginning of my career in my early twenties. There's a speech in it where one of the characters talks about the 'career of his affections', and it was being acted as though the actor meant developing progress of his affections from bachelor to married man – sort of growing up – but I looked up the word during rehearsals and found that the word 'career' had one meaning at the time the play was written, and that was 'sharp and sudden changes of direction'.

⁸Paul Verhoeven's directing credits include *RoboCop* (1987), *Total Recall* (1990), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Starship Troopers* (1997) and *Hollow Man* (2000).

We still sometimes use it. We see a horse and cart careering across the road, or a vehicle careering out of control. I thought that was really useful because we've somehow taken that word and made it a really ordinary word like 'plan' or 'progress of logical steps from A to B to C to D'. But it's the opposite: sharp and sudden unexpected changes of direction. And I think that's really helpful. In life people are able to think about their careers or their work or the way that they think or whatever it is like that.⁹

The banana-skin technique uses an outrageous joke or visual to help people to creatively change their direction.

Here's a technique that does it by adding in a random element to spark some ideas using a set of 'Joker' cards to pick from when a little push is needed. On each card is a suggestion for where to find inspiration; just throw a dice to choose which one.

J
O
K
E
R

Look in the fridge. Pick up a couple of items and for each one look at the packaging, the design, the ingredients and any instructions. Think about when you last used it and when you're planning to use it next. What does it make you feel? What's good about it? What's bad? How can you relate it to the creative problem you're working on?

R
E
K
O
J

J
O
K
E
R

Turn on the TV. Flick through five of the channels and watch each one for a minute or two. Try and make what you see – what the images are and what the people are saying – relevant to what you're working on.

R
E
K
O
J

J
O
K
E
R

Open up a newspaper. Quickly pick two or three articles, without thinking too much about which ones, and read the first few paragraphs. Think about the stories and the people involved. Think about what your story should be and how the stories you're reading connect to it.

R
E
K
O
J

J
O
K
E
R

Browse through a magazine. Look at the ads and pictures. Why do they look the way they do? What are they trying to convey about the advertisers or its products? How significant is the style, the layout and the colours? What ideas do they spark about your own project?

R
E
K
O
J

J
O
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E
R

Go to 'Stumble Upon' on the web. Stumble Upon (www.stumbleupon.com) is a great way to randomly discover websites that you might otherwise never find. You enter in the areas that interest you then hit 'stumble' and it'll take you to a randomly generated web page. Do this five or six times and you will stumble upon something you'll realise is relevant to your project. Guaranteed.

R
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K
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J

J
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R

Go to the library or bookshop. Randomly pick out three books from different sections that you wouldn't normally look at. Take them to a seating area and spend 10 or 15 minutes with each, flicking through them and stopping to read passages that catch your eye. Take time to read about the author, think about what made him or her want to write the book in the first place and try to picture what their lives are like. Think about how they'd approach your own project. What would the title of the book be?

R
E
K
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J

⁹When he heard this, Dave realised for the first time he does actually have a 'career'.

When Annie and I had our first hits, instead of recording in a straightforward expensive recording studio in London or New York I would come up with crazy places to set up equipment and start making an album. These odd locations triggered different moods and helped keep our records sounding unusual and fresh.

The album *Be Yourself Tonight*, an album that included the number-one hit song 'There Must Be An Angel Playing With My Heart' (with Stevie Wonder on harmonica) and other hits like 'Would I Lie to You' and 'Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves' (a duet with Aretha Franklin), was mostly recorded in a small room in a youth club in the suburbs of Paris! The French teenagers hanging around the club didn't believe we were making an album until the BBC turned up to interview us for a TV show. So there we were, very famous at the time and could have been recording in luxury anywhere in the world; instead we made our way to the outskirts of Paris every day and up lots of stairs fighting our way through table-tennis matches and tip-toeing through ballet lessons into a tiny room that Annie decorated from the flea market, to start the day's recording experiments.



On the album *We Too Are One* we hired a suite in a legendary rock and roll hotel called the Mayflower overlooking Central Park (not as glamorous as you might think, it was at the time a very run-down hotel with lots of cockroaches). We set up our recording gear and started making an album in the hotel suite, every now and then going for walks down 8th Avenue or in Central Park and then back in the elevator up to our suite to record Annie's vocal or me playing a guitar track. Being in the hotel is a completely different thing from being in a sterile studio environment, and there are lots of things there to stimulate you – like the bar, for instance!

(It was the same bar years ago where I first met Madonna and, even though she was just starting her career, I could tell she had her head screwed on. And boy does she know how to play in the Business Playground!)

CHAOS THEORY

If creativity is about making connections between two seemingly unconnected things, then another way to throw something random into the mix is to use arbitrary words. Try this: grab

a dictionary and randomly pick out a word then force a connection between it and the problem you're trying to solve. We did it to see what would happen with the *traffic congestion in LA* problem. The word we randomly picked by speedily flicking through the pages and then plopping an ink-stained finger on a page was: 'donation'. Then we thought, 'Um, that's a hard one, maybe we should try again and pretend we hadn't found that one,' but then honesty kicked in. We realised if we did that it wouldn't be random, it would in fact be *cheating*, so decided to go with it and force ourselves to quickly come up with solutions for the traffic congestion in LA problem that, somehow or other, relate to the idea of donation.

After a couple of minutes of pondering this what we came up with:

- Drivers could be made to donate to charity every time they drive.
- People could be asked to donate their cars to charity and use other means of transport.
- There could be a donation drive to build a better form of transport.
- Companies could be encouraged to sponsor free bus passes to donate to commuters.
- Employers could be asked to donate one day a week of their employees' time to work that doesn't require them to travel.

Not that any of these are amazing ideas, but what struck us about the process was this: *it actually works*. **Yes folks, if you get past that initial barrier of thinking there's no obvious connection between your problem and the word you've randomly picked, you can force yourself to come up with ideas, some of which might be worth pursuing.**

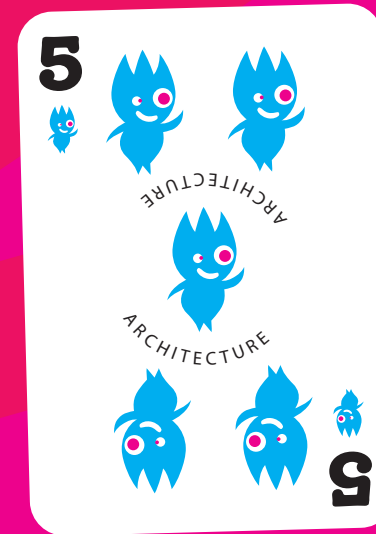
The other thing that struck us (and might have struck you too) was that in retrospect the word we randomly picked *might not have been that random after all*. Maybe subconsciously we picked 'donation' by filtering out some of the other words on that page ('donkey', 'door', 'doodle', 'dong', 'doom', to name a few) that we thought would be non-starters. It's possible, but then again maybe it doesn't really matter that the subconscious mind rather than the conscious one made the choice (see Chapter 5). The point of the exercise is to introduce stimuli that seem unrelated to the problem we're trying to solve and, even if the subconscious is pushing us in a certain direction, perhaps that's just fine.

Incidentally, we have created a game called *SLAP!* as a fun way for making connections between random words. It is in the form of a pack of playing cards so we couldn't include it in the book, but here's a sample and you can find out more at www.businessplayground.com



Instructions

1. There are four suits of 13 cards each showing a different word.
2. Divide the 52 cards equally amongst the players.
3. Players take turns putting cards face up on a pile in the middle, looking for two with the same face value.
4. The first player who sees two that match and shouts 'SLAP!' has 60 seconds to come up with a single word that connects the two words on the cards (a possible answer to the one shown is 'caterpillar').
5. If the player comes up with a word in time he or she picks up all the cards in the pile.
6. The winner is the first to collect all of the cards.



Sometimes writers get what they call ‘writers block’. It’s traumatising and a vortex, as the more they worry the worse it gets. I’ve often helped snap them out of it by being either very humorous, crazy or taking them on an adventure. I’ve done this with everyone from Bryan Ferry to Katy Perry and I’m sure a few other people rhyming in ‘erry’. Sometimes getting blind drunk helps. Or the opposite – a great picnic in the countryside with a traditional picnic basket and all the right accoutrements. Involving them in the



shopping for cheese, garlic sausage, etc., takes their mind off the problem with the lyrics and it’s great for me because I love picnics.¹⁰

Of course, one of the things about good ideas is that often they seem very obvious afterwards and so we are prone to discount the thinking that went into creating them.

Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft, told Business Playground, ‘To me it’s like a moment of obviousness. While there’s an obvious idea here: take a simple programming language and connect it with a microprocessor, maybe that’s a really great idea. It seems so obvious and then you go, “Wait a minute, has anybody else figured it out, or are they on the same track?” And if they’re not you really have to follow up and jump on the idea and see if you can make it happen and a lot of times it means forming a team of people, or of course in your case a rock band, around a certain musical style, and then it’s a lot of hard work to make it real, to actualise it.’

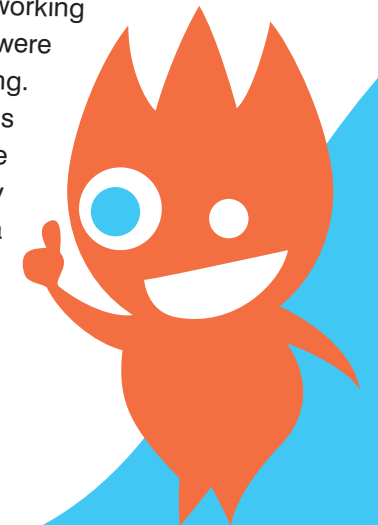
¹⁰Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt came out with some playing cards called *Oblique Strategies* that have cryptic remarks on them and can help break a deadlock or solve a dilemma.

In fact, one entrepreneur has built his whole business around the notion that in retrospect good ideas are obvious. Evan Williams is co-founder and CEO of Twitter, the social networking platform that made it big in 2008, and the company he created to develop Twitter was initially called Obvious for that very reason.

Twitter might seem like an obvious idea now – give friends a way to tell one another what they’re up to – but on paper it really wasn’t.

Doing is believing and when you’ve done it you know why it works, but trying to explain why it works to someone who hasn’t tried it is difficult, to say the least. We mean, why you would develop another form of keeping in touch when you’ve already got your online profile, blogs, email, phone, IM, not to mention plain old meeting face-to-face (known as F2F in the online world)?

Evan told us that he didn’t even try to convince investors of the value of Twitter before it was a real product. ‘It would have been a tough sell,’ he says. He and his team of developers built a prototype of Twitter along with some other applications they’d been working on to try them out. ‘Once we had the prototype and were using it ourselves, then it was very clear it was interesting. It was immediately compelling to the small group of us using it.’ Even when they launched Twitter it didn’t take off right away and Evan eventually bought the company back from the original investors, but by 2008 it was a runaway success with a valuation in the many millions.¹¹



¹¹The reported valuation of Twitter had reached \$1 billion by September 2009.

Twitter's use has gradually changed over time from giving friends trivial updates, or 'Tweets', in answer to the question 'What are you doing?' to being a way for people to keep in touch with what's happening on a much broader scale. No longer just learning that your pal Joe is having a cup of joe,¹² but also updates on politics, favourite bands and sports teams or whatever else you decide to sign up to. 'It's continually surprising,' Evan says. 'Even though we have had the notion for a while that Twitter has the potential to be very big, it's the way it's grown and the different uses and the reality of it becoming big in so many different ways that is always surprising.' Obvious, right?

ON THE CONTRARY

If you think about it, most problems are contradictions between two opposing factors. An umbrella needs to be small and unobtrusive when it's dry, big and strong when it's raining. How can something that needs to be folded up into a small package that can stuffed in a bag also be unfolded into a large canopy that won't break or blow away when it's windy? **Taking time to understand the contradictions inherent within a problem often helps us to find innovative solutions to solve it.** Take the electric car, for instance. As you might know they've been around in one form or another for decades. The first one was developed by Thomas Davenport of New Hampshire in 1834. His ran on rails using a battery for power that couldn't be recharged. Later that century, after the rechargeable battery had been invented, electric cars became popular in Europe and then in the US as smoother and quieter alternatives to cars powered by

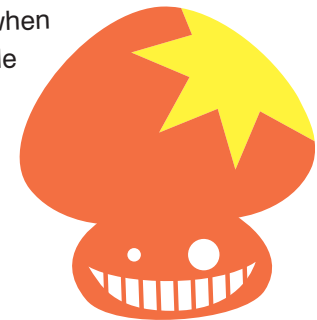
¹²Or, coffee.

internal combustion engines. By 1897 the Electric Carriage and Wagon Company of Philadelphia had built a fleet of electric-powered New York taxis, and at one point, just before the turn of the century, electric cars even outsold petrol-powered ones.

But that was then and this is now. Since, electric cars have almost disappeared because of an inherent contradiction between two factors: the weight of the battery and the performance of the car. To make longer trips than just local journeys, especially getting up any reasonable speed, requires a great big battery. And the car has to carry that heavy battery around, so using up a lot of power. The electric car just doesn't make sense for long journeys.

One innovator has realised there might be a way to remove the contradiction if a network of battery recharging centres could be created that were close enough to one another, so a small battery would be sufficient for each section of the journey.

Shai Agassi is the founder of A Better Place, a company based in Paolo Alto, California, that aims to build a personable and scalable public transportation that ends our dependence on oil (in other words, a *better place*). Working with governments, regions and cities, A Better Place is building a network of recharging spots and battery replacement stations. And when people aren't using their electric car, say while they're at home or at work, they can plug it in to top up the battery charge. For longer journeys there will be places along the route where you can change batteries for a fully recharged one without leaving the car and in less time than it takes to full up a tank with petrol.





The whole system is completely automated. The charge spots are the size of parking meters, and when a driver pulls up to one of them a computer on board the car tells it to link up to the charger and start charging the battery. At battery-replacement stations a driver simply pulls up and sits back, and within three minutes a new fully-charged battery has replaced the depleted one. Drivers will pay a subscription charge to use the system, much like they do for their mobile phones, but instead of buying minutes they'll be buying miles. A Better Place has already signed up

Israel, Canada, Australia, Denmark, Hawaii and Bay Area cities in California to participate in the scheme and Renault is already building electric cars for it.

Agassi's idea shows the power of bringing together two opposing forces. Just like a banana skin and a shoe. But how about going on step further, and forgetting batteries altogether? Instead, powering electric vehicles directly from the grid, South Korea is experimenting with cars that pull in power from cables beneath the road. According to the developer of the project, Korea's Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), power from two nuclear systems would be enough to run six million cars.

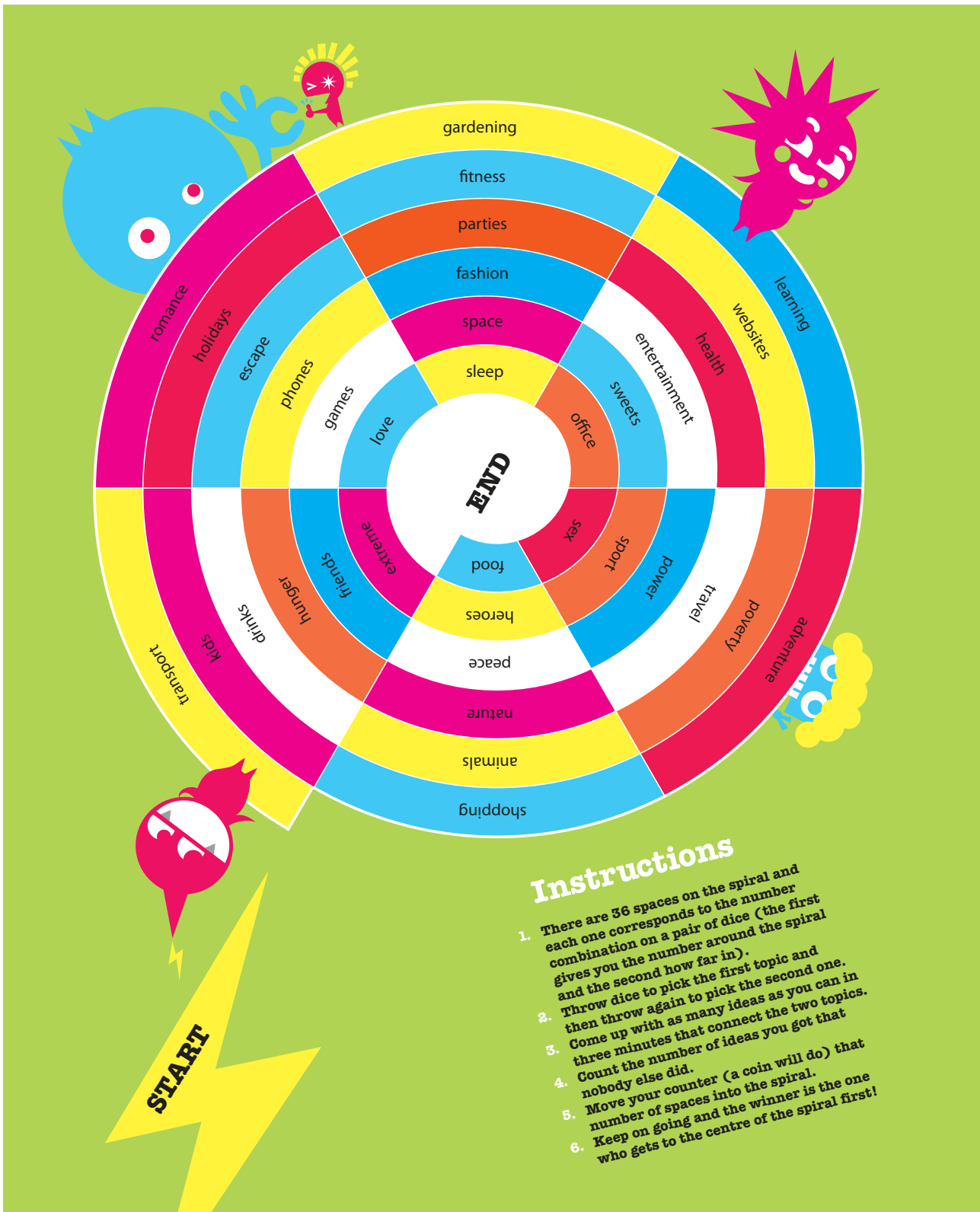
Sounds to us like one big fun Scalextric set!

MOVE ONE SPACE FORWARD TO THE NEXT CHAPTER ... OR ROLL THE DICE

Being in control is very reassuring in business situations, while chaos goes against the grain. However, once in a while we need to impose a little orchestrated chaos to get the creative engines revving.

Great writers and musicians throughout the ages have used techniques involving randomness to create amazing work, and in business we can learn from that.

Humour is one way of introducing an unexpected element into the mix and to change the direction of thinking that might be getting stale as old bread, and it has been shown to have a direct relationship to creative ability. Creativity is about connecting two seemingly unconnected, often opposing pieces, and as Paul Allen and Evan Williams have shown, the resulting idea often in retrospect seems obvious. So now that we've tried a bunch of techniques to come up with some new ideas, in the next chapter we decide which ones to move forward with, and which ones to say a sad farewell to.



BOARD GAME: INSPIRAL

How it works: Making connections between seemingly unrelated things is at the very heart of creativity and this game *forces* us to make those connections to come up with something entirely new!

How to play: A player roles two dice to find the first theme, then rolls them again to find the second. The number combinations of the dice identify which space to go to (e.g. throwing a 4 and a 3 on the first roll means go to the space that is 4 around the spiral and 3 in towards the centre), and so which theme. Now players have three minutes to come up with as many ideas, sensible or crazy, as they can think of that link the two themes.

After every turn players count up the number of ideas they each came up with that are unique (meaning, distinct from one

another), and move their counters to the corresponding number of spaces around the spiral of the board, moving inwards towards the centre of the spiral. So, if a player came up with three unique ideas then he or she moves three spaces around the board towards its centre.

Example: The first theme might be 'sweets' and the second theme 'animals', and so players need to think of ideas that link the two – such as sweets shaped like animals, or sweets to give to animals as treats. Or maybe sweets made from chicken to give to children as a way to sneak protein into their diets. (We know, calm down ... it's just an example.)

To win: The first player to reach the centre of the spiral is the winner.

