toy story

Work with toys and games and you enter a world full of imagination, nostalgia, and the wonder of childhood.

BY JOHN CRAWFORD
it was a milestone moment, the first time the young company received a truckload of merchandise from its overseas manufacturer.

Antonio Turco-Rivas, MBA ’05, stared at the truck and its contents, a product that seemed like something out of a dream. Called a Silly Soft, the colorful creature had big eyes and a big mouth and doubled as a toddler seat. The truck was packed with a thousand of them. “I remember looking at all the boxes and thinking, ‘How are we going to get rid of all this?’” says Turco-Rivas, who along with J.B. Schneider, MBA ’05, founded P’kolino, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., provider of toys, arts and crafts, and children’s furniture.

Welcome to the world of children’s playthings. A number of Babson alumni work with toys and games, and on first glance their jobs are like any other in business. They deal with budgets and suppliers, with projects to manage and trends to track. As Turco-Rivas stared at those Silly Softs, he was just another entrepreneur. He had a product, and he needed to move it.

But working with toys also takes you to another place far removed from adult life, say these alumni. They talk of reconnecting with their childhood, their work triggering memories from long ago. The bottom line still matters, of course, but so does fun, and magic, and wonder.

The Toy Marketer

When Kimberly Willis Boyd, MBA ’08, interviews job candidates, she likes to ask what their favorite toys were growing up. That’s a logical question, given that Boyd works at Hasbro. She’s director of global marketing for KRE-O, a new line of construction blocks that debuted this August with sets of buildable Transformers.

What’s unusual is Boyd’s answer to her own question, for she admits that she didn’t have a favorite toy as a girl. “I was into playing office. I used to love filling out forms. That is so ironic now that I work for a toy company.” Indeed, Boyd is surrounded by toys at Hasbro’s Pawtucket, R.I., headquarters. Mr. Potato Head stands guard by the parking lot, and life-sized figures, from Transformer robots to Marvel superheroes, line the halls. Besides some Babson essentials, such as a file of cases from her Fast Track days and her old negotiations textbook, Boyd has filled her office with the various toy brands she’s worked on since arriving at Hasbro five years ago. Those brands include Marvel, Star Wars, Nerf, and FurReal Friends. “I love toys now,” she says.

As brand manager, Boyd is engrossed with every aspect of a toy, from conception to final product. She contemplates advertising strategies, works with the design teams, stays vigilant about the budget, and keeps a crystal ball in her back pocket. Part of her job is figuring out what products will strike a cultural nerve and become the next must-have gift under the Christmas tree. Predicting that isn’t easy, being that she’s regularly working some 18 months in advance and dealing with the unpredictable nature of childhood. “Adults are finicky, but kids are changing their minds to times faster,” she says.

To create and market great toys, Boyd immerses herself in kid culture. She keeps tabs on what children eat, wear, watch, and do. TV, video games, and the computer all represent competition for children’s attention. “You need to be on top of everything going on in kids’ lives,” she says.

Hasbro has research teams to help Boyd with this monumental task, and she loves conversing with her nieces and nephews to gain perspective. In tune with their world, she has sat with them for long
talks where she peppers them with questions. Boyd also falls back on her own childhood experiences, thinking about how her play developed over time and what toys she enjoyed when not in her imaginary office. “It’s amazing how much insight you have having once been a little girl,” she says.

Experiencing that connection to childhood is one of the reasons people love to work with toys, Boyd says. They remain rooted in those wondrous times long after they or even their children have grown. “Everything takes you back to a memory,” Boyd says. “You think about your own childhood, about the memories you have, and the role you can play now in someone’s development. It’s such an amazing feeling.”

Hasbro is Boyd’s second job in toys—she also worked in public relations at Lego—and her experience is typical. Once people enter the imaginative, collaborative, and nostalgic atmosphere of the toy industry, they usually don’t leave, Boyd says.

The Game Designer
The job of Shaun Greene ’08 also takes him back to his youth. As a boy, he designed intricate games, drawing a dungeon’s blueprint in his notebook and using Legos to create epic battles in his bedroom. Riding the school bus, he pictured an adventurous character sitting on the telephone wire, and as the bus moved, Greene imagined he could make the character jump over telephone poles and slide under tree limbs.

Now Greene designs games for a living. He’s project lead at Muzzy Lane Software, an educational game company in Newburyport, Mass. He has worked on Making History II, which is a World War II strategy game, and Practice Marketing, which teaches marketing to entry-level college students. His current project, MiddWorld Online, places high school students studying entry-level French and Spanish into a plaza where they must use a foreign language to navigate. “The objective is to have fun,” he says, “but at the same time, we’re trying to get them to learn something.”

Greene works in a field that continues to take tremendous leaps forward. Video games were once no more than just a ball bouncing back and forth, but now they encompass detailed worlds, stories, and art. “It’s a field that didn’t exist 40 years ago,” Greene says. “Now it’s one of the most advanced fields.”

Breaking into that industry took effort, for the profession requires a mix of talent and technical skills. Greene taught himself programming, but that was no guarantee he would be a good designer. Like a writer or painter, a designer must have instinct for what will engage people. “You can’t just read three books and say, ‘Now I can design games well,’” Greene says.

Babson may not offer courses in game design, but Greene finds that his college education helps in other ways. “I definitely call on skills I learned at Babson for project management,” he says. “There’s a lot of leadership required to make sure all aspects of the games are moving forward.”

Designers create realities from nothing, and that complex undertaking involves managing programming, writing, and art, not to mention the budget. The process reminds Greene of a circus routine. “There are so many spinning plates that need to balance on top of other spinning plates for such a long period of time,” he says.
Despite the challenges, Greene loves his job. He remembers bringing an early version of *MiddWorld Online* to a New York City school. The students became absorbed in exploring the world of the game. “I love building things and creating things,” Greene says. “Creating is joyful.”

**The Entrepreneurs**

Antonio Turco-Rivas and J.B. Schneider of P’kolino liked the typical boy toys growing up. Turco-Rivas was fond of Tonka trucks, while Schneider enjoyed building tracks for Hot Wheels cars. The two met while Babson MBA students, and they both felt an urge to start a business. Turco-Rivas had worked for Internet companies but wanted to create something tangible he could hold in his hands. Schneider, meanwhile, thought of his children. He had worked in marketing in the automotive industry, but he didn’t enjoy his job. When he came home from work, he shut that part of his life away from family and didn’t talk about it. Schneider felt that was wrong. He wanted a job to share with his children. “I wasn’t giving a good example,” he says.

Schneider and Turco-Rivas wished to create and sell a consumer product, but that can be a challenging route for a startup. Just picture a store aisle, the shelves loaded with items. “To stand out, you need to be special,” Turco-Rivas says. Despite the odds, the entrepreneurs believed they saw an opportunity with children’s furniture, which generally looked like miniaturized versions of adult furniture. Why not create something that was more playful?

As MBA students, the two convinced the Rhode Island School of Design to help them. The result was a modular play table with multiple configurations. It became the founders’ first product, and they named their new business P’kolino, a twist on the Italian “piccolino,” which means “little one.” The name was catchy and, with its European flavor, sounded a little high-end, exactly the market they were targeting.

For two years, Schneider and Turco-Rivas didn’t take a salary, but they persevered and their business grew. They cultivated the Babson network, and it gave them suggestions about manufacturing and helped them land their first customer, FAO Schwarz. Turco-Rivas recommends other startups do the same. The network has power, if you take time to develop it. “I can't emphasize that enough,” he says. In gratitude to Babson, the pair frequently speaks to classes, including a product design course, where students are given a crack at creating something for P’kolino.

Nowadays, P’kolino products are available in 2,000 stores across the U.S. Like elves working in a real-life Santa’s workshop, P’kolino’s staff continually conjures up ideas for products. A few hundred ideas a year make it into a sketchbook, but while designers may render some of those ideas on a computer and even build a few prototypes, the company only introduces 30 products a year. Such whittling down can be exhausting, as well as mysterious. The creative process isn’t easy to understand. “It is a tough thing to get your mind around,” Schneider says. “Sometimes we develop a product in an afternoon. Sometimes it takes three years.”

Holding on to their innocent days of Tonka trucks and Hot Wheels cars helps, Turco-Rivas says. Staying a child at heart, at least a little bit, is key in the toy business.