



**Maker**

# The Playful Scientist

## (And Where to Find One)

Call me crazy, but just don't call me mad. By Saul Griffith

This month, I've been ranting to everyone I know about the term "mad scientist." I don't like it. I feel like it is used to trivialize logical, rational thought and to undermine scientific results and the wonderful pursuits carefully adding to the sum total of human knowledge.

My friends tell me that I might be a little overboard on this one, and that "mad scientist" is a playful satire or fictional stereotype. They then argue that rather than a campaign against the use of "mad scientist," I should encourage its reclamation in the same way the gay community has reclaimed "queer" as a positive term.

"Playful scientist," I say, would be a term well worth reclaiming, but "mad" is a terrible adjective in an era where conservatives seem to be making ground in undermining such things as education on the theory of evolution. I blame comic books. No — wait a second — I blame great literature like Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*.

Perhaps I should blame myself. I kitesurf. It's a fantastic sport, kind of like waterskiing behind a jumbo jet, as I'm wont to say. Pre-2001, it was the domain of cranks and lunatics who experimented with the immature equipment of a new sport. (There, you see! I just used the words "cranks and lunatics" — but really, I meant it affectionately.) Prior to the highly commercialized industry that kitesurfing is today, anyone who did it had to build/modify/repair the equipment. It was wonderful; you were always

happy to see another "freak" at the beach trying to jerry-rig something safer or faster or bigger than the last thing they tried. It was great community.

Then the mad scientists of the early days were replaced with adrenaline junkies who consumed the commercial gear and thought that anything

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noncommercial was tantamount to heresy. The crew of jokesters I surf with were vilified at the beach by people who arrived in shiny SUVs with brand-name stickers on everything they owned. "That won't work." "That's too dangerous." I gave up on giving them my rant on why basic hydrodynamics showed that the fins on their shiny boards they thought were giving them lift were really just giving them drag. I stopped

Photograph by Tim Anderson





Kitesurfing: The sport of playful scientists. "It's like waterskiing behind a jumbo jet."

explaining that a rectangle of \$10 plywood would be more effective than their \$500 carbon fiber, advanced, PCB-impregnated dolphin killer.

So now I go to the less popular beaches and seek out the weirdoes — the guys and gals who believe that having fun is the goal and hacking stuff is the surefire route to nirvana. Failing is fun, after all. Try something new, and even if it doesn't work, it's likely to be hilarious. I was reminded of this just yesterday when I met two new freaks. One had a pair of sunglasses with only one lens. Unperturbed, he just kept going, looking like a one-eyed pirate amidst the East Bay fog.

His friend farms eBay for used sports stuff to modify into wind-powered car-park dragsters, and we had an excited discussion involving the obvious link between jet boats, wind-surfing sails, paragliding lifting winches, and what we should do next weekend. I could tell he was my kind of freak because he'd recently sold his Porsche in favor of a VW transporter with a pop-top roof conversion and retrofitted water cooling. "It's way more fun than the Porsche, and it said. The best thing about meeting the weirdoes is that the conversation works to communicate information first, NDAs later, if ever. It's all about sharing each other's excitement and experience.

There I go again, guilty as charged, characterizing myself and my glorious peers as eccentrics, cranks, weirdoes ... "mad scientists."

So let's go with "playful scientists" instead. Where do you find them? Burning Man is an obvious repository, but there are events every weekend populated by the sort of people you want to know. Oshkosh's yearly AirVenture has all the homebuilt airplane nerds that you could ever want to meet. Keep your eye out for bicycle and car swap meets and carnivals — always a rich source. Try emailing or calling people who built some cool thing that you found on the web. Odds are that they want you to come over and meet them; that's why they put it up on the web. A few weeks ago, I learned an enormous amount by visiting the Alameda workshop of a custom bike frame builder. I've never seen so many handmade jigs and working Bridgeports in such a small space. I guess I'm coming around to the opinion that it's time for everyone to come out of the closet and celebrate being playful scientists. We may be crazy, but we are not mad.

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Saul Griffith thinks about open source hardware while working with the power-nerds at Squid Labs ([squid-labs.com](http://squid-labs.com)).

